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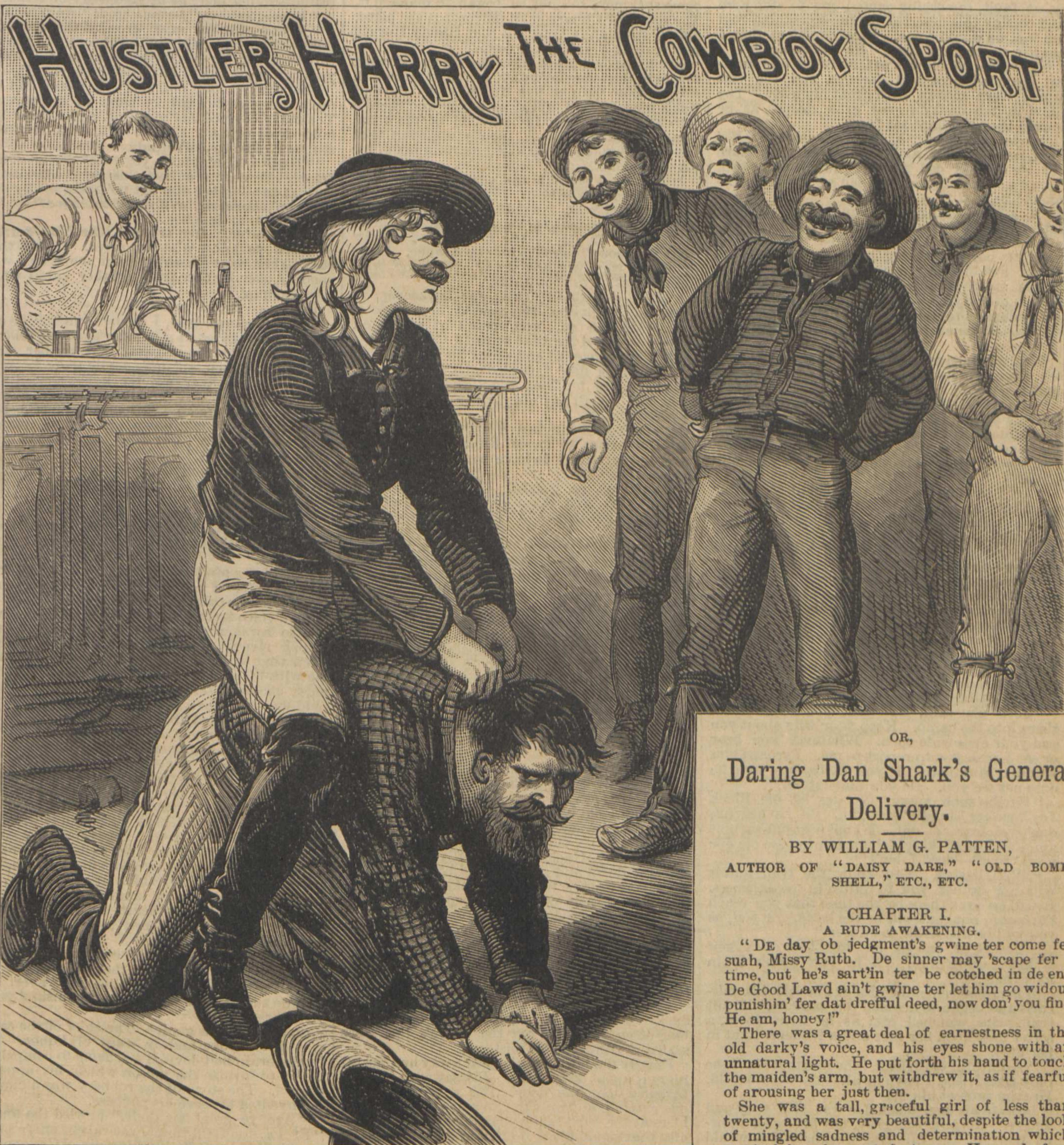
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OR,
Daring Dan Shark's General
Delivery.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "DAISY DARE," "OLD BOMB-SHELL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. A RUDE AWAKENING.

"De day ob judgment's gwine ter come fer suah, Missy Ruth. De sinner may 'scape fer a time, but he's sart'in ter be cotched in de en'. De Good Lawd ain't gwine ter let him go widout punishin' fer dat drefful deed, now don'y you fink He am, honey!"

There was a great deal of earnestness in the old darky's voice, and his eyes shone with an unnatural light. He put forth his hand to touch the maiden's arm, but withdrew it, as if fearful of arousing her just then.

She was a tall, graceful girl of less than twenty, and was very beautiful, despite the look of mingled sadness and determination which marked her clear cut features. Her pale face appeared even paler than it really was, on ac-

"WOOF!" EJACULATED THE COWBOY. "WE'RE BOUN' TO GIT THAR, ELI!"

count of the blackness of her abundant hair and the midnight shade of her eyes, which looked as if they could gleam with the fierce intensity of bitter hatred, or glow with the melting tenderness of a powerful love.

She was dressed in stout, serviceable garments, about which there was nothing to attract attention, save the peculiar clasp at her throat. A tiny silver dagger driven straight through the center of a crimson heart—truly a peculiar ornament.

The sun was sinking behind the western peaks, and its last rays fell upon the strange couple as they stood near the little cabin built upon the mountain-spur. At their feet the descent was almost perpendicular. Far down at the mouth of a narrow cut which led away into the hills, planted against the base of a steep bluff, was a rude cabin. The stage trail, which ran through the cut, passed the cabin and led onward into the mining-camp close at hand.

Cimarron City was the name which had been given the place. There was the usual collection of rough slab shanties, among which were a hotel and several saloons, but the place was far from a city. Its hopeful inhabitants, however, like those of many another young mining strike, were confident that the time was not far distant when they could lay undisputed claim to the title.

The girl was gazing down toward the camp in an abstracted manner. The old negro watched her closely until she spoke, first giving her body a little shake, as if to throw off the strange spell which had crept over her.

"I feel sure that I shall yet find him down there. When we came off the trail, and entirely at fault, something caused me to stop here and occupy this deserted cabin—something told me that he would come. I feel confident that I am not wasting my time. *He will come!*"

Her voice, which was naturally low and musical, sounded firm and decisive, and the last words were spoken with great intensity. The glow in the darky's eyes grew deeper as he looked upon her hard-set face.

"Bress de Lawd!" he said, earnestly. "Yo' ain't losin' yer faif, am yo', Missy Ruth? I clare ter goodness I des 'gun ter fink you's gittin' 'scouraged, yo' looked ser sad an' down-at-the-mouf-like."

"I was thinking, Joe—thinking of my poor father, who fell by that dastard's hand."

"Don' yo' fink ob dat!" urged the negro, a look of horror coming over his face. "Ole Massa Foscolo—my pore ole massa! It des makes me squirmish roun' dis yar reegon ter fink ob him layin' dere all w'ite an' dead."

The darky pressed both hands over his heart, and looked the emotion that he could not express in words.

The girl's face seemed to grow still whiter, and her voice sounded harder than before when she spoke again:

"*His work!*—the work of a treacherous fiend! We nursed him back to life, and, like the deadly, deceitful serpent that he is, he turned and stung the hand that fed him. And to think that I was ever deceived by his winning ways and soft smile!"

"An' I took de low-down, no'-count critter fer a gen'leman! Huah! It d'es make dis ole nig wi's he nebber was bo'n—it do now! He was allus edgin' roun' wif his sof' words an' his fine ways. An' den de mis'ble sarpint killed dat pore ole man—dat pore ole man!"

With a sudden change from rage to sadness, he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and half turned away, winking rapidly as the rays of the setting sun fell upon his face.

The girl continued to gaze down toward the mining-camp, her face losing none of that firm, determined look despite the expression of utterable sadness which came over it.

After a time she turned toward the negro.

"Joe," she said, "I want you to go down there into the camp. Keep your wits about you and your eyes wide open. Whatever you hear or see I wish you to report to me. Perhaps you will find *him* there. If you do, be sure that he does not see you. Do you understand?"

"Sart'in suah, missy. Yo' des let ole Black Joe lone fer 'standin' straight. I'll be keerful, don' yo' fear fo' dat. I kno' w'at dat sarpint am, an' I don' keer fo' ter hab 'im see ole Joe nosin' roun'—deed I don't!"

"Well, hasten. You know the trail, and it will not bother you to return in the darkness. It will be dark there by the time that you reach the camp, but that will be the better for you, as you will be less liable to be seen."

"Yo's right, but yo' mus' take keer ob ye'self wile I'm down dere. I'll be bac' soon's I kin look roun'."

With some reluctance Black Joe left his mistress and began to descend the narrow, difficult trail. She watched him as he went down, a softer look upon her face and a tenderer light in her eyes.

"A faithful old friend," she murmured; "the only true friend I have in all this wide world. Heaven protect him!"

Despite his age, Black Joe was still spry and active. His hair was gray, but his limbs showed none of the faltering weakness that would naturally be expected of him.

The trail did not descend directly down the

mountain; indeed, it would have been impossible for it to have done so on account of the precipitous bluff below the crag upon which the cabin was built. It ran along the side for a short distance, then began a gradual descent.

Thirty minutes had passed before the old darky reached the foot of the descent. The sun had disappeared behind the western range and a dusky gloom lay heavily in the little pocket. Lights were beginning to twinkle in Cimarron.

Black Joe entered the camp and stole softly along the main street, as he had done once or twice before. He peered keenly to the right and left, keeping a sharp lookout for his quarry.

Finally he halted before the Silver Palace, a combined hotel and saloon. The lamp within the big red globe above door had been lighted, and through the open doorway the darky could catch a glimpse of two brilliantly-lighted rooms.

Horace Kelnot, one of Cimarron's most influential citizens, was the proprietor of the Silver Palace. Kelnot had not long been a resident of the stirring little camp, but, for some reason, on purchasing the Silver Palace had at once sprung into popularity. He was a tall, handsome dark-bearded man, of commanding appearance and faultless physique. He was universally feared and respected by the rougher element of the camp, for once or twice he had been compelled to demonstrate the fact that he was a "bad man to crowd." The rapidity with which he could "draw" was simply amazing, and this qualification had led the toughs to dub him "Handy Horace."

The Silver Palace had been popular before Kelnot became the proprietor, and it had become still more so since he began to manage it. The sports of Cimarron all patronized the place, and it was plainly apparent that Handy Horace was reaping a golden harvest.

Black Joe decided to enter the place. Passing through the open doorway, he found himself in a long room with a bar at one end. Beyond was a mass of card tables, with here and there a faro stand. At the further end of the room was a curtained stage, plainly showing that Kelnot provided a variety entertainment for his customers.

It being yet early in the evening, there were but few in the saloon. The barkeeper was drumming idly on the polished bar, and at two or three of the deal tables were seated some of the elegant sports of the camp, waiting for their "pigeons" to make an appearance. Some of them were whiling away the time with light games of various kinds.

"Hello, Snowball!" cried the barkeeper, as he espied Black Joe, who paused in the doorway. "Come in, you chunk of alabaster. Have you called for your bitters?"

The darky grinned and shook his head.

"Dis chick don' took med'cine," he declared. "Des com' in ter look roun' de place. Don' know but I shall buy dis yar hen-coop. Be yo' de proprietah?"

The barkeeper laughed a little. He had seen the negro once or twice before, and being at leisure, determined to have some sport at his expense.

"Oh, don't be bashful, Uncle 'Rastus," he smiled. "It isn't often wee are honored by a call from a gentleman of color. What will you have?"

Joe came in slowly, still grinning and appearing ill-at-ease. The little man behind the bar did not dream that the negro was drawn there by any other motive than that of idle curiosity; he did not dream that that swift glance around the room was one of close scrutiny rather than of timidity. Yet such was the case.

"Your humble servant, uncle," bowed the barkeeper. "I am ready to do anything to accommodate you. Command me."

"Now I don' keer fer ter comman' nobody, chile," grinned Joe; "an' don' want no bitters. But Ise mighty tired, an' I'd des like ter sit down in one ob dese yer' cheers an' res' er wile."

The man behind the bar hesitated. He had hoped to have a little sport with the old negro, but he hardly cared to have the darky loafing around the place. But at that moment the negro did look nearly exhausted, and as there were no customers present just then, he nodded his assent.

"Certainly, Uncle 'Rastus; if you are tired, sit right down and rest your old bones."

Joe was profuse with his thanks, and hastened to avail himself of the barkeeper's liberality. He placed his chair in a position that brought him facing the door. Then he sat down and tilted it back against the wall. In that position he was able to inspect every one who entered.

"Dere," he observed, with a sigh of satisfaction, "dis am w'at I calls cumfut."

Then the barkeeper attempted to question the darky concerning the maiden with whom Joe had often been seen, but the negro's lips were sealed in regard to his mistress.

Finally the barkeeper turned away and busied himself about something. Joe sat with his eyes fastened upon the door. For a long time no one entered, and only the low voices of the gamblers at the card-tables could be heard. Gradually that sound grew fainter and blended into a far-away murmur. From that it sunk to what appeared to be absolute silence.

Black Joe was asleep.

He dreamed. At first his visions were pleasant, then before his eyes seemed to rise the body of a white-haired old man, who lay dead—murdered by a dastardly blow. Then he saw the murderer, a smiling, handsome devil, who preached with an evil purpose gleaming in his blue eyes. Suddenly this smiling demon caught Black Joe by the throat and—

"Wake up hayer, ye black imp o' Satan!"

Harsly the voice sounded in his ear, and he awoke to find an iron hand on his throat and a revolver pressed against his forehead.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN FROM HIGH NOTCH.

"DE blessed Lawd!"

Gasping, his eyes rolling in terror at the rude awakening, Black Joe managed to faintly utter those words. At that instant he felt sure that the dreadful being who had slain his old master had him by the throat; he felt sure his minutes were numbered, and instead of struggling to escape, he closed his eyes and began to pray.

"None o' thet, ye chunk o' blackness!" growled the same unpleasant voice, while the grasp on his throat relaxed a little, allowing him to breathe more freely. "Don't shet yer eyes an' flop off ther hooks. Wake up hyer, an' let me see ther color o' yer peepers."

Surely that was not *his* voice? This man's words were harsh and unpleasant; he had always spoken in a smooth, pleasant tone. Black Joe ventured to open his eyes, and although they rested upon a repulsive, bewhiskered, almost brutal-looking face, he uttered a cry of relief.

"Bress goodness!" he muttered; "'tain't him!"

"W'at's thet ye say?" growled the gigantic fellow who had him by the throat. "Are ye throwin' out 'sinewvations' bout me? P'raps ye don't know who I am, Ole Mahogerny?"

The darky could not reply in words, but he made a motion toward the hand at his throat. The other divined his meaning, and relaxed his hold, drawing back a little with that revolver still held close to Joe's head.

"Deed I don' know ye, boss," declared the frightened negro, as soon as he could speak. "W'at hab I ebber dun dat yo' grabs me by der froat an' chokes de breff clean outer me?"

The big man laughed.

"No use fer ye ter try thet, Ole Mahogerny! I reckon ye know w'at I'm arter. I want thet thar likker w'at ye stole frum me w'en I war snoozin' over by ther trail ter ther cabin whar ye'r stoppin'."

Black Joe looked amazed.

"Fo' goodness, boss, I nebber dun it!" he declared, as he gazed at a number of rough fellows who were standing around. "I nebber stole nuffin', gen'lemen, an' dat's des de trufe."

"Now w'at's ther use ter lie?" growled the big fellow. "I war layin' over thar snoozin' w'en yer kem down. I had er quart bottle plum' full w'en I laid down an' not er durned drap w'en I 'woke. Yer ther black imp o' midnight w'at stole it."

Joe gazed around hopelessly at the grinning faces on every hand. Evidently the crowd was enjoying his discomfort.

"Ise reddy ter took my oaf, boss—"

"Hang yer oaths!" was the snarling response. "W'at I want's ther tanglefoot, an' ye've got ter pan it out."

"But I des ain't got it, boss, an' Ise tellin' de honest' trufe. I nebber see'd ye w'en I com' down frum de cabin—deed I nebber!"

Joe's voice trembled, and his appearance was one to awaken sympathy, but not one of the throng stepped forward as his friend. They knew that big, overgrown giant too well to meddle with his affairs, and many of them were his most obedient servants, ready to dance at his bidding. The bartender looked the indignation which he hesitated about expressing. Even he did not care to make an enemy of the acknowledged "Chief of Cimarron."

"It's whisky or yer skulp," growled the big brute. "Ye've got ter make that quart o' likker good or I'll blow ther bull ruff o' yer cranium off. Cum, pan out!"

The darky did not speak, although it was evident that he wished to. He trembled visibly, and his eyes rolled in their sockets. It was a sight to elicit sympathy instead of mirth, but the crowd seemed to think it very funny, for they roared with coarse laughter.

The barkeeper was heard to mutter a suppressed oath as he turned away, unwilling to witness the scene longer.

"Cum, ye thievin' imp," continued Joe's tormentor, "ef ye hev drunk ther whisky, jist order ernuther quart o' ther barkeep' hyer. Ef ye'll do that, I'll let ye off wi'out punishin' ye as ye desarve."

So that was his game! The chief of the camp was dead broke and in want of liquor. His fertile brain had devised a scheme to compel the darky to furnish the poison which his appetite craved. The story of the robbery was a clumsy lie invented to serve his purpose.

"Are ye goin' ter do it?" howled the tough. "Ef ye don't I'll tunnel yer cabeza shore's mer name's Hick'ry Bill, ther king-pin o' Cimarron!"

"Wal, I guess not, William!"

A confident voice, filled with quiet determination. Hickory Bill turned to confront—

A man at least six feet tall and "built from the ground up." Not a thick-set, ox-like figure, but one which combined great strength and manly grace; a form which filled the rough cowboy costume until the clothes fitted as if cut by a metropolitan tailor. Every limb was rounded and muscular, yet was not overburdened or cumbersome. The head was well poised on a perfect neck, the wide-brimmed sombrero being set jauntily on one side of his brown, curling mass of hair. His features were round and clear-cut as if chiseled from marble, but the square, full lower jaw denoted a determined, unswerving nature. His eyes were blue and filled with a half-mirthful yet wholly unfathomable light.

With one exception, no ornaments were visible upon his person. On the bosom of his blue woolen shirt was a gold pin, representing a whip and sombrero. No weapons were in sight in belt or pocket of this independent cowboy, for a cowboy he appeared to be.

He stood with his hands resting carelessly on his hips, a smile upon his handsome face, while his blue eyes looked fairly into the depths of Hickory Bill's unsteady orbs.

For a moment the Chief of Cimarron appeared too startled to speak. He turned his gaze upon this stranger who had presumed to confront him, but did not release his hold upon the darky.

As for Black Joe he now appeared to be more terrified than before, but he paid not the least attention to Hickory Bill. Instead, his eyes were fixed upon the face of the new-comer, and his teeth chattered with a fright that was in no way assumed. But for the detaining hand upon his collar, he would have fled as swiftly as his trembling limbs would have moved.

"Did ye wag yer jaw at me?" demanded the now scowling Chief of Cimarron.

"Wal, I shu'd remark!" was the calm response.

An ugly light lit up the bully's eyes. He had been assuming anger to frighten the negro; there was little need to assume it now, for his worst passions were aroused.

"W'at d'yer want?" was the tough's fierce demand.

"Let up on thet colored gent's collar, you big blowhard!"

Hickory was fairly staggered, while a gasp of amazement ran over the crowd. Would this stranger dare face the "chief" of the camp? And how could he avoid doing so after uttering those insulting words?

With a hoarse bellow, Bill released his grip upon the darky and turned upon the presumptuous cowboy, while Black Joe slunk from the room; but no one noticed his departure. Every eye was fixed upon Hickory Bill and the stranger.

"Go fer 'im, Billy," squeaked bummer, Posey Pete. "Knock ther humps offen ther crittur!"

"Give him the knife!" Gonzalo, a dark-faced Spaniard, hissed in the bully's ear!

The bummer and the Spaniard were two of Hickory's trusted tools.

"D'ver know who I am, yer presumpchus cur frum Dog Alley?"

"I regret ter say that I hain't sighted yer brand, partner," was the reply, as the cowboy still smiled in an unruffled manner.

"Waal, I'm Hick'ry Bill, I am! I jist run this hyer camp. I'm ther man w'at killed John Sullivan by blowin' on him."

"Wal, that's ther fus't I've heerd of Sullivan's death. So yer killed him by blowin'? By that I reckon yer torked him ter death. 'Spose ther poor feller laid down an' died outer disgust."

For a moment the bully did not know what to say or do. His face grew black, and he fairly choked with rage. After a time he managed to gasp:

"Who are you?"

The stranger laughed in a careless way. He was still entirely at his ease, despite the bully's evident rage.

"Me? Wal, mer pards call me Hustler Harry, ther Hard Nut ter Crack. I've just drapped down inter these hyar parts frum High Notch, an' I'm on ther lookout fer sport. I'm er high old Maverick fer fun, an' ef ye've got anything of ther kind in this hyer burgh, w'y, just trot it out!"

"Ye'll find fun ter spare afore ye git dun wi' me," vociferated Bill, in his ugliest mood.

The Man from High Notch looked surprised.

"What? Not you? You don't mean to insinuate—"

"Thet I'm er goin' ter chaw ye all up—yes! I'll larn ye w'at it means ter stick yer nose inter my bus'nes'; I'll larn ye ter cum crownin' roun' this hyer burgh! I'm er goin' ter drap on ye an' squalle ye outer existence. I'm er goin' ter teetotally wipe ye all over this hyer ranch. I'm er goin' ter pound ye inter jelly. You hear me warble!"

"The Dutch ye say! I'm s'prised!"

With this exclamation Hustler Harry critically surveyed Hickory from head to foot, and then burst into laughter, at which Bill's face turned fairly purple with rage, and, like a wild beast he snarled:

"Laff, ye mis'ble coot! I'll soon make ye squawk outer ther t'other side o' yer mouth! Take that!"

He leaped forward, striking straight for the Hustler's still laughing face. It was a terrific blow, and was followed by a loud *smack* as of flesh striking flesh.

A gasp ran over the throng.

But the Man from High Notch still stood there in his tracks, smiling and calm, with Hickory Bill's right fist held fast in the palm of one sinewy hand, where it had struck, instead of landing between his eyes.

"I'm Hustler Harry, ther Hard Nut ter Crack!" cried the unshaken stranger.

Then he seemed to grasp Bill's wrist and jerk the bully toward him. Swiftly he leaped to one side, at the same time kicking the feet out from under the vaunted "chief," who went crashing down upon his face; then the Hustler seized him by the collar of his coat and a convenient part of his pantaloons.

At this instant, however, Posey Pete flung himself upon Harry's back, piping shrilly:

"Down ther critter! Don't let 'im up!"

Seemingly without an effort, but still laughing, the Man from High Notch arose, at the same time lifting the heavy form of the big tough. Once upright, with a sudden shake, Pete was dislodged. Then Harry lifted the Cimarron chief above his head and hurled him fairly over the heads of the crowd, feet-foremost, through the open door into the street beyond.

CHAPTER III.

THE FATAL BIRTHMARK.

It was an amazing feat of strength, and for an instant the crowd seemed fairly paralyzed. That a human being could perform such an apparently impossible act, not one of them had ever dreamed. True, an outlay of strength sufficient to carry the heavy body of the bully clear over the heads of the crowd would also take it out through the door, but either feat seemed an impossibility.

Posey Pete, the bummer, shrunk back in consternation. Casper Gonzalo crouched with his hand upon the haft of a partly-drawn stiletto, his eyes dilated with amazement, as he breathed a Spanish oath.

Hustler Harry, that smile still on his face, his hands resting lightly on his hips, ran his eyes over the circle of amazed faces. Not even a tremor of limb or a quick breath told that the wonderful act had cost him an unusual outlay of muscular power.

"Ther jamboree's begun, pard; walk in an' hav' a han' in ther fun. Just hop right inter ther ring an' grab ther bull by ther horns. Now's yer chance ter rope haydoogins of sport, so don't let ther opportunity slip! I'm Hustler Harry, ther Hard Nut from High Notch, an' I'm just a wild Maverick on ther stampede w'en I gits ter goin'. If ary of you critters thinks he kin putt his brand onto me, just let him tackle ther job. I'm hyer ter 'muse ther congregation."

Composedly, almost softly spoken, were the words, and but for the natural cowboy lingo, one would have thought they came from the lips of a polished gentleman. Once more he ran his eyes over the throng, the smile upon his face giving place to a look of mild surprise.

"Not one!" he murmured in accents of disappointment. "Ther fun's over 'fore it's fairly begun. Is this ther kind of er jamboree this hyer town turns out? Just one kickin', bellerin' steer, an' I flopped him first throw! Woof!"

"Look ter ther boss," cried Posey Pete. "P'raps ther p'izen cuss has killed him. Sumbuddy keep an eye on ther critter; I'll go see."

He worked his way through the crowd and passed through the doorway. Bill was just rising to a sitting posture, looking dazed and shaken. The red light from the globe above the door showed Posey the form of his "boss," and in an instant the bummer was beside the discomfited chief.

"How d'yer feel, pard?" anxiously inquired the satellite.

Hickory uttered a groan, but did not immediately reply.

"Spect ye'r all tore out," continued Pete, as he supported the bully in a sitting posture. "It's er durned wonder that ye hain't plum' bruck inter kindlin'."

"How'd he do it? Durn his hide! Never struck such er reg'lar blizzard afore," grunted Bill.

"Don't ax me *how* he dun it, fer *I'll* never tell. I jumped ther durned critter an' tried ter hold 'im down, but, good Lord! he never minded it a tall. He just riz right up wi' both o' us, an' ther way he sent ye sailin' through ther air was simply superfyin'."

"An' ther way I lit out hyer was simply paralyzin'," was Hickory Bill's assertion. "Fer er second or so I didn't know er blamed thing. Whar is ther critter now?"

"In there, crownin' an' floppin' of his wings, I guess he's bout ter call hisself ther chief o' this hyer camp."

Hickory Bill uttered a growl.

"Let him ef he darst! I hain't done wi' him. Soon's I kin git mer balance, ther galoot frum High Notch shell heer frum me erg'in."

"Thet's ther tork, pard! Now brace up, fer hyer cum ther gang."

Out of the saloon poured the crowd, eager to learn the fate of the unlucky chief. With some difficulty, Bill succeeded in getting upon his feet, aided by Posey Pete. He faced the crowd, an ugly look upon his face.

"I reckon ye hoped I war dead," he growled. "But I hain't. I'm hyer ter down ther best o' ye."

"Better begin with the Hustler," boldly suggested some one on the outskirts of the crowd.

A tigerish gleam leaped into the bully's eyes as he glared around in search for the speaker. But whoever it was, he had the prudence not to let himself be seen by the terror of Cimarron City.

"Ef that sneakin' cur 'll step out hyer, I'll ram his words down his throat," declared the enraged tough.

But no one came forward.

With a slow, yet decisive step, Hickory advanced into the saloon. The crowd followed, anticipating further sport.

Within the room the bully's eyes moved around, looking for his late antagonist. After a time he espied him seated at a deal table at the further end of the room, talking with a bearded stranger.

Some of the throng expected that the chief would at once renew the quarrel, but they were doomed to disappointment. Bill turned toward the barkeeper.

"Say, Johnny, jist er light snifter ter clean mer throat. My inwards are all outer kilter, an' need 'lin'."

The barkeeper hesitated, but catching the eye of a tall, handsome man who entered at that moment, and perceiving a slight nod, hastened to set a bottle and glass before the thirsty bruiser.

Bill quickly turned out a brimming glass and tossed it off. Another followed, and he had filled the third, when a hand stole under his arm and the liquor disappeared. Bill did not notice this, and when he attempted to lift the glass, he found it gone. A snort of amazement broke from his lips.

"Waal, I'm jiggered!"

Bill rubbed his eyes, stared at the spot where the glass should be, then gazed at the man behind the bar, his face the very picture of stupid surprise.

"Reckon I've got 'em," he muttered. "Did'n't think I war shook up *that* bad!"

While he was rubbing his eyes, that sly hand stole back and the glass, now empty, was softly placed upon the bar. A moment later Bill espied it.

"Great Scott!"

His hair seemed to rise upon his head. He stared at the glass as if at a ghost.

"I filled it," he muttered; "but now it's empty. I didn't drink it."

"We'll have to charge it to you just the same," observed the barkeeper, unable to repress a smile.

"Charge an' be durned!" growled the bully. "I'm goin' ter hev that drink. I don't reckon that'll happen twice."

But it did. Bill filled the glass and removed his eyes from it for an instant. When he attempted to lift it to his lips, it had disappeared.

With a yell, the chief turned to flee from the spot and found himself face to face with Posey Pete, who was just draining the glass.

A cry of rage burst from the bully's lips, and in a moment he caught the bummer by the throat, stopping the final swallow ere it could pass into his stomach.

"Yer sneakin' soaker!" he snarled. "I'll larn ye ter steal my likker."

He drew back his fist to strike the strangling bummer when he felt an iron grip upon his arm, and a commanding voice said:

"None of that here! If you must quarrel, get out."

The words were spoken in a low tone, and accompanied by a look that caused the bully to lower his hand.

Horace Kelnot was the speaker. He it was who had given the barkeeper a covert signal to set out liquor for Bill, and he now gripped the bully's arm in a manner that was a significant though silent signal.

Hickory understood Handy Horace's meaning, and released his hold upon Posey. To the crowd it seemed that the proprietor of the Silver Palace had simply quelled a row; but, in reality, he had done more.

No one noticed that one by one Casper Gonzalo, Posey Pete, and lastly, Hickory Bill left the saloon. No one noticed that Handy Horace soon passed through a side door into an adjoining room. No one thought that the four men were closeted in a private apartment a few minutes later.

During this time Hustler Harry and the strange bewhiskered man had been talking in low tones. When the crowd left the saloon to ascertain the fate of Hickory Bill, a medium-sized, well-dressed individual had touched the Man from High Notch on the arm.

"Excuse me," said the stranger. "I would like to speak with you."

"Yours ter command," smiled the cowboy.

"If you will step over to one of these tables," ventured the stranger. "We can talk there without being overheard."

"If it's private, pard, w'y sart'in."

Side by side they approached one of the tables and sat down. The Man from High Notch was a trifle curious to know what the stranger wanted of him, but he was careful to conceal whatever surprise or curiosity he felt. The stranger was a rather pleasant-looking individual, with keen, ferret-like eyes. When they were seated, he said:

"Shall I order liquor, pard?"

"Not fer me," smiled Harry. "I hope ye won't think me oncivil, but I don't tetch ther stuff."

The dark-eyed man looked surprised.

"So you are reforming, are you?" he finally said. "Rather a late day to begin—eh?"

Just a bit of the pleasant look faded from Harry's face, and was replaced by a light of what appeared to be genuine surprise.

"W'at d'yer mean?" he demanded, looking sharply at the other.

"Nothing at all, only what I said. Nearly all of us begin to reform at a rather late date."

But the suspicions of the Man from High Notch were aroused. Quietly he demanded:

"W'at d'yer want of me, pard? Ef ye've got any tork ter make, spit her out straight an' lively. I hain't ther man ter tromp roun' er buffer waller all day, 'thout never gittin' ter ther p'int I'm steerin' fer, an' it natterally makes me tired ter see ary other er doin' of it. Just make er clean break an' let yer tongue loose. I'm Hustlin' Harry, just kem down inter these hyer parts frum ther reeg'on of High Notch. Am I ther stray Maverick ye'r lookin' fer?"

"I think you are," was the calm reply, "though my man usually answers to the name of Jack Tackaloo."

The speaker's right hand had crept below the level of the table. Hustling Harry noticed this, although he did not appear to do so.

"Jack Tackaloo." Did the Man from High Notch start when he heard that name, or did the keen-eyed stranger fancy it?

"Then I reckon ye'r hoofin' long ther wrong trail, pard," observed Harry, calmly. "Thet hain't my handle nor never war."

The dark-eyed man laughed.

"You play your part well, Jack; but, it's no go. You are no more a cowboy than I am. And, whether you deny it or not, I can prove that you are Jack Tackaloo."

The Hustler showed his white, even teeth in a smile, which the stranger fancied contained more of menace than mirth.

"Pard, it hain't often as my word's doubted, an' it has proved er mighty unhealthy thing fer er galoot ter 'sinervate as much as you hev; but you may mean all right. Ef you kin prove that I'm this Jack W'at-d'-yer-call 'im, I just natterally cave in thet I don't know my own name. So thar, now!"

"Then, here is my proof!" cried the keen-eyed man.

He seized Harry's left hand and turned it, until the wrist was exposed. And there, in plain view, about two inches from the base of the hand, was a small heart-shaped birth-mark, almost crimson in color!

CHAPTER IV.

A DISAPPEARANCE AND A BLOOD-STAIN.

"DON'T move a hand toward a weapon, Jack Tackaloo!" hissed the stranger. "I have you covered under the table, and will send a lead pill through you in an instant!"

They gazed into each other's eyes steadily, without flinching, a cold, determined stare on the part of the stranger, while the Hustler was equally cool, and apparently indifferent.

"Pard," he smiled, "I smoked yer leetle game afore ye made it known. I c'u'd 'a' tolle ye long 'fore this thet you war gittin' out a gun under kiver o' ther table. But, ye know two kin play at thet, an', ef I do say it, I'll bet er bunch of long horns thet I had *my* gun out fu'st!"

The stranger looked startled, but, as Harry's right hand was below the level of the table, he was unable to tell whether the cowboy spoke the truth or not. There was something in those smiling blue eyes, however, that told him Harry did not lie.

It was truly a peculiar situation, and a cold chill crept over the keen-eyed stranger as he realized that he was covered by the weapon of a desperate man. Jack Tackaloo he knew was a smiling, soft-voiced wretch, who would not hesitate at any deed of violence.

Neither of the men heeded the throng over by the bar, or the card-players at the tables near by. The keen-eyed man did not dare to take his eyes from the face of the smiling fellow who sat opposite; and, as for the Hustler from High-Notch, he had no desire to look around.

"Well, pard," softly asked Harry, "what's thar next move?"

This was a poser. At that instant the stranger was not ready to make any move. Indeed, he felt disgusted with himself for not suspecting the smiling cowboy of the very game that he was playing. It was apparent that, as he declared, Hustler Harry had "smoked his little game" from the first.

By way of saying something, the ferret-eyed man asked:

"Do you still deny that you are Jack Tackaloo?"

"Bet yer socks!" was the emphatic reply. "I don't know just who this hyer Tackaloo is. He may be er millyonheir, but, ef he am, I'll never lay claim ter his title. Fact is, if I war rollin' in yaller wealth, I never c'u'd give up ther range. Just one whiff of ther trail, one beller frum ther herd, one rattle of long horns sets my blood ter b'ilin' an' seethin' like I war sot fair onto er red-hot furnace an' er nigger fireman shovin' pitch-pine an' rosin fer all he war wu'th. I never c'u'd settle down an' enjoy wealth, so don't try ter make me out ther long-lost son of sum Jay Gould or Vanderbilt. 'Twon't go down."

"You play your part well, Jack; but you can't wool me," was the stranger's firm reply. "I'm not after an heir, but I am looking for a red-handed murderer!"

There seemed to be little feigning about the Hustler's surprise then. Indeed, if he was feigning, he was a clever actor.

"A murderer!" he gasped. "Wal, thet is somethin' different. An' so this hyer Jack Tackaloo's er murderer?"

"No one should know it better than yourself," was the response.

Harry's face suddenly became grave and earnest, and when he spoke again, his voice was low, firm and impressive:

"Yer may think I'm lyin', pard—I more'n hate 'spect ye will—but I'm givin' it to ye straight w'en I sw'ar thet I never heerd of this hyer Jack Tackaloo till you spoke his name yerself. I am not him any more'n you are. I don't know w'at that thar mark on my arm may seem ter prove, but one thing's sart'in, it don't prove thet I'm ther man you want. I'm plain Harry Hanson, a cowboy frum ther range. Of late I've had great luck at flippin' pasteboards, an' hev found more fun an' skids in it than there is at cow-punchin'. After clearin' out ther best men of High Notch, at their own games, I just drapped dow hyer on ther outlook fer fresh fields an' more sport."

The stranger shook his head.

"No, I can't believe your story," he admitted. "I know your face, and that heart-like birthmark gives you dead away. You are the very man I have trailed from Missouri, and I am going to take you back there to answer for your crime, as sure as my name is Dan Shark."

"Then ye'r a detective?"

"That's my profession, and, without boasting, I can say that Old Shark, the Shadow, has never made a failure. I had you spotted, Jack, before you knifed one of Kansas City's prominent citizens. You have led me a long dance, but I have run you down at last!"

The man from High Notch was grave enough now. He studied the face of the detective closely, and seemed at a loss just what to say. It was indeed a peculiar situation, for while the man was sure he had run down his quarry, he was far from having it secured.

"W'y didn't ye git ther dead drop onto me w'en yer had er chance?" asked Harry. "Ef I war yer game, w'at'd yer give me er chance ter sock ye fer? Ye might'a' knowned thet I shu'd git 'spicious w'en ye called me over hyer, an' begun ter beat round ther ring."

"To be frank with you, Jack, I was not sure that you were the man I sought. I wanted a chance to hear you talk, and to see the mark upon your arm. As Jack Tackaloo you wore a full brown beard; as Hustling Harry, the cowboy sport, the beard has disappeared, and you have only a black mustache. Yet you are the man I want."

A look of annoyance rested on the face of the Man from High Notch. The persistence with which the detective called him Jack Tackaloo was aggravating.

"Pard," said the cowboy, "I'm not ther man ter be roped fer sumbuddy else. We hev both got holt on er gun under this hyer table. I'm not goin' ter throw down my weppin' an' cave, so w'at yer goin' ter do?"

The situation had not improved since Harry asked a similar question a short time before. Dan Shark realized that he was in a delicate predicament. There was but one thing which would serve him now; that was *bluff*.

"I am going to take you, dead or alive!" was the detective's firm reply.

"That's a mighty sight easier said than done. Ef I tuck er notion I c'u'd bore ye under ther table. You can't see my movements, an' ef I liked I c'u'd lift ther hammer of me gun, at ther same time pressin' onto ther trigger ter keep it from clinkin'. Then all I'd never ter do'd be ter let mer thumb slip. Ef it didn't give ye yer last sickness, it would be a plum' wonder!"

Old Shark knew that the Hustler's words were true, and a cold chill swept over him.

Jack Tackaloo was an unscrupulous wretch, who would hesitate at no crime. Knowing this, he more than half expected to hear the report of the cowboy's weapon, and feel the deadly lead.

"You don't dare to do it!" he declared, swiftly. "You can't shoot so quick that I will not give you back the dose."

Harry laughed. There was something chillin' g about that laugh, even though the Man from High Notch seemed amused.

"Ye'r wrong thar, partner. Ther instant I fired I shu'd spring up. Ef you answered ye might hit er leg, but nothin' wuss. Ef ye tried ter git yer gun out from under ther table, I'd fill ye full of ballast wile ye war doin' of it. I reckon ye will ketch ther ijee by an' by thet I'm er mighty hard nut ter crack."

The detective knew not what reply to make. For the time he was utterly nonplused.

At this instant there was a sudden commotion near the bar. The Hustler's eyes seemed to leave Old Shark's face for an instant, and the detective fancied his opportunity had come. Swiftly he jerked the hand which held the revolver from beneath the table.

But, this was the very move that the Man from High Notch had been hoping for! How it was done Dan Shark could never tell, but, Harry's knees shot upward toward his chin, and in an instant he kicked table and detective from him, at the same time going over backward himself. Ere he could make a move to prevent, Old Shark found himself sprawled upon the floor with the table upon him!

The instant that the Hustler struck upon his back his revolver spoke. Four shots he fired while laying there.

There was a crash of breaking glass, then darkness!

The cowboy had shot out the lights!

Swiftly then the Hustler rolled over and over in the darkness. He heard a rush of feet, a shot and a cry of pain. He had planned his movements before his startling act, and therefore arose cautiously to his feet. Carefully he moved, hoping to avoid the terrified ones who were rushing aimlessly here and there. In this he was successful.

A few moments later the lights were restored.

A strangely excited and frightened crowd was revealed.

Every one had sprung up from the card-table, and many had drawn weapons.

The Hustler, with ready revolver, glanced around for the detective, and discovered that he had disappeared.

Hickory Bill had returned to the saloon, however, and was standing near the overturned table and chairs.

From out of the crowd one of the gamblers advanced, demanding sharply:

"What does this mean?"

"I reckon it means foul play," growled the chief of the camp. "Whar's ther feller thet galoot war talkin' with?"

He pointed toward Harry.

"Wal, now, William, you tell," smiled the cowboy sport, as he advanced toward the bully.

"As fer foul play, I reckon it was er little rough ter knock out ther 'luminators in thet way, but I'm ready ter fut ther bill 'thout grumblin'."

"That's all right, but thar's been blood-lettin'. Look thar!"

Bill pointed down toward the floor, where a small red stain was plainly visible.

"Thar's been foul murder dun!" he cried.

"Hyer's ther proof, an' thar's ther murderer!"

He turned his pointing finger from the red stain on the floor to the Man from High Notch, who stood within four feet of him.

There was a moment of breathless silence; then, swift as thought, the Hustler leaped forward, striking out straight from the shoulder. The blow caught Bill fairly between the eyes, sending him to the floor.

CHAPTER V.

BREAKING A BRONCHO.

"I'M Hustler Harry, ther Hard Nut ter Crack! W'en I git ter goin', I'm wuss'en er wild steer on ther rampage. Turn out, ye common critters, an' give me room!"

Thus the Man from High Notch expressed his defiance as he faced the startled crowd. For one brief instant the smile left his face and was replaced by a hard, icy look, and his blue eyes glittered strangely. He had struck the bully of Cimarron City with his left hand, for his right still held the revolver with which he had shot out the lights.

For an instant dead silence followed his defiant words. Then Bill scrambled to his feet, uttering a roar of rage.

"Whoop!" he bellowed. "I'M Hick'ry Bill, ther high cock o' ther walk! I eat chain-lightnin' spiced wi' brimstone! I'm er holy terror on trucks, an' don't ye fergit it! Whar's ther critter w'at struck Hick'ry Bill?"

"Ye needn't go fur in s'arch of him, William," observed Harry, calmly. "Ef ye pick out er Maverick of erbout my size, ye won't never hev any trouble fer ropin' ther wrong critter."

Bill glared fiercely toward the speaker, showing his teeth in a savage snarl. With one hand he gently rubbed the spot where Harry's hand first bad struck.

"I'll hev sackersfaction fer thet," he declared. "No man ever socked Hick'ry Bill atween ther peepers an' hed ther chance ter brag o' it much. Putt up yer gun an' I'll wollop ther hide offen ye."

With a light laugh, the Man from High Notch

thrust the revolver into a convenient pocket, and then bowed mockingly toward the bully.

"At yer service, William! Just give ther signal an' let ther fun begin. We kin furnish amusement fer ther boys free of charge."

Hickory Bill threw off his coat, but the Hustler made no motion to remove the short, square-cut jacket which just then he wore over his blue woolen shirt. He simply regarded the bully's movements in a calm, indifferent manner.

"Cum, peel ef ye'r' goin' ter," growled the chief.

"But, I hain't goin' ter, William," smiled the cowboy sport. "I don't keer ter hev ther sharks goin' through mer pockets, an' so I shell keep mer clothes on. *Ketch?*"

Eager to see sport, the crowd formed a ring around the two men. Soon Bill was ready and faced the Man from High Notch. The big "chief" was trembling with excitement and anger, but Harry was perfectly composed and indifferent, his habitual smile resting on his handsome face.

Among the sports in the crowd a few bets were made, but there seemed to be a feeling of uncertainty in regard to the outcome of that contest of giants. Those who were well acquainted with Hickory's powers, but had witnessed his previous defeat at the hands of the Man from High Notch, were not eager to venture much upon his head. Indeed, many of them were offering even money on the Hustler. One enthusiastic fellow even offered to bet three to two on the cowboy. Whether his confidence shook the faith of Bill's backers or not, sure it was that he did not find many eager to cover his money.

With a feeling of intense rage, Hickory Bill noted his loss of popularity. Within himself he made a vow to doubly redeem the ground that he had lost.

"Are ye reddy, critter?" he growled, with his eyes fixed upon the cowboy.

Harry had buttoned his jacket tightly around him, plainly showing the outlines of his faultless form. He stood with his hands resting upon his hips.

"All reddy, William," he replied.

Slowly Bill advanced, his huge fists clinched and upraised in an awkward guard. Still the Man from High Notch stood with his hands upon his hips. His utter coolness and indifference enraged the bully, and he suddenly lunged forward, striking straight for Harry's smiling face. With his hands still upon his hips, not offering to use them for his own protection, the Man from High Notch leaped nimbly to the left. As the bully passed, being unable to pause instantly, the cowboy kicked Bill's feet from beneath him. Down upon his hands and knees went the chief, and in an instant the Hustler was astride of his back.

"Whoa, Jinuwary!" laughed the cowboy. "This hyer hain't ther fu'st time I've straddled er broncho. Easy, critter! None of yer buckin' now, or ye'll git ther spurs."

A shout of laughter came from the crowd. The fight had taken an unexpected turn and the sports of the camp at once caught the humorous side of the affair.

"Two to one the cow-puncher breaks the beast without getting a throw!" shouted one.

But Hickory was now furious. Despite the weight upon his back he easily arose to his feet. Harry abandoned his position and sprung away a few feet, to stand again with his hands upon his hips and that same provoking smile on his face.

"Cuss ye!" roared the chief, as he regained an upright position. "Try ter ride me fer er hoss, will ye? Dang my hide!"

Once more he advanced, but with great caution now. He had learned that he had no common man to deal with.

Nimbly as a jumping-jack, Hustler Harry began to dance here and there around the angry giant. With some difficulty Bill followed the motions.

"Stan' still!" he growled. "W'at yer tryin' ter act—"

He did not finish the sentence, for the Hustler's knuckles caught him between the eyes, and the vaunted chief went down. Swiftly the Man from High Notch rolled the bully's body over with his foot, and, as Bill scrambled up, Harry again leaped upon his back, forcing the fellow down upon his hands and knees.

"Woof!" ejaculated the cowboy. "We're boun' ter git thar, Eli! I said I'd ride this critter, an' I'm goin' ter do it shore's mer name's Hustler Harry, ther Hard Nutter Crack."

Once more Hickory succeeded in getting upon his feet, and once more the Man from High Notch sprung away and stood with his hands on his hips, laughing.

Never was there a man more amazed than was Cimarron's chief just then. Twice had that laughing cowboy fairly knocked him down; twice had the Hustler used him as he might have used a bucking broncho.

"The clumsy brute!"

Bill heard this expression of disgust from one of the spectators, and in an instant he became fairly insane with passion. From its place of concealment a long, wicked knife appeared, and

with a snarling cry, the bully rushed blindly at the laughing cowboy.

A cry of warning broke from the crowd.

Harry did not attempt to avoid that blind rush, but suddenly sprung straight toward his mad foe. The next instant Hickory's wrist was caught in an iron grasp that prevented him from striking the deadly blow. Then the cowboy's hard right fist beat a rapid tattoo upon the bully's face. Every blow counted.

The crowd was wild with excitement, but, through it all, Posey Pete and Casper Gonzalo had been at work. Here and there they whispered a word in the ears of such men as they chose, and in every case received an affirmative nod.

It did not take the Hustler long to bring the fight—if fight it could be called—to a finish. Hickory Bill seemed like a child in the grasp of a giant. The brute strength of the bully was utterly useless when pitted against the strength and skill of his foe.

The knife dropped from Bill's fingers, striking point down in the floor, where it stood, quivering slightly, long after the contest was ended. Harry knew when his time came, and releasing his hold upon the chief's wrist, he struck a terrible blow, which stretched Hickory at full length upon the floor.

Although he was not knocked senseless, the bully made no attempt to arise.

"Hooray!" shouted one of the crowd. "Ther Hard Nut has wound up William's worsted!"

The cry was echoed by a portion of the crowd, but the majority were ominously silent. No one paid any attention to the fallen chief, but, just then, every eye was fastened upon the cowboy.

"I reckon the show's over, pard," smiled Harry. "It surely is, unless sumbuddy else is anxus ter corral sum sport. As fer William, he war knocked out in the final round-up."

Posey Pete stepped forward, his face flushed, and his nose looking redder than usual.

"Whar's ther man ye war torkin' with afore ye shot out ther lights?" demanded the bummer.

A murmur came from many of the crowd.

Harry surveyed Posey Pete from head to foot, then turned helplessly upon the spectators.

"W'at d'yer call it?" he asked, in evident wonder. "It's alive an' kin talk, but I can't name it."

Not a smile greeted this question, but one of the gamblers stepped forward.

"Stranger," he said, "perhaps you had better answer his question."

The smile vanished from Harry's face, and a strange light glowed in his blue eyes. His head came up a little, his nostrils dilated, and he appeared like an animal that had scented danger.

"W'at d'yer want ter know?" he demanded. "Speak out an' talk straight."

"We want to know what became of that man with whom you were talking just before you shot out the lights. He is gone, and we only find a blood-stain upon the floor."

"Which means ther same as that dirty dog insinuated," coldly uttered the cowboy, as he pointed toward Bill. "It means that you pretend as how I have played foul wi' ther stranger. Gentlemen, whar's ther boddy? P'raps ye think I've got it hid round me person sumw'ares?"

"No doubt you have accomplices who have removed the body," said the gambler. "The fact is, I fancy I have seen you around here before to-day, though you were not playing the part of a cowboy. If I am not mistaken, you belong to the Brothers of the Red Heart!"

"He's their chief, durn 'im!" yelled a voice.

It was as though a match had been hurled into a mass of powder. With one impulse every man seemed to leap toward the accused cowboy. They sprung upon him. Back and forth swayed the mass, then moved toward the door, Hustler Harry swept along in their midst.

"Lynch him!"

A blood-chilling cry, which was echoed by another of an unexpected nature as the throng poured out upon the street.

"Help, help! Oh, save me for—"

A stifled, broken scream and a woman's voice!

CHAPTER VI.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

THE face of Martel Molina, Cimarron City's most wealthy mine-owner, looked decidedly grim and unpleasant as he drummed nervously on his desk and scowled darkly now and then. He was alone in the private room of his house. The time was evening, and he had drawn the curtains and lighted the swinging lamp above the desk.

Molina was a man of about fifty, with a firm, decisive face that was marked by deep lines which seemed to tell of great physical or mental suffering. His hair and beard were very white.

In a great measure, the lines upon his face and the unusual whiteness of his hair and beard were caused by severe nervous headaches, which had troubled him for years.

Molina's wife was dead, but his daughter, Pearl, lived with him doing everything she could to make her father comfortable in a physical way. But, just now, Martel Molina's

mind was in a disturbed condition, and Pearl was responsible.

"Confound it!" he muttered. "This is the first time I ever knew Pearl to rebel against my wishes. Kelnot has shown me positive proof of his wealth, and he appears to be a polished gentleman. A good match for any girl."

For a few moments he was silent once more. That he was thinking deeply was apparent by the look on his face. Finally, he broke out, a trifle savagely:

"I know where the trouble lays. She has become fascinated with that confounded young Craddoc. I would like to know just who and what that fellow is. He represents himself as the agent of Eastern capitalists who are looking for safe investments, but I do not half-believe his story. He is a handsome fellow, and I am confident that he is a gambler or rogue of some kind. As for Horace Kelnot, I owe him a debt that I can never repay."

Again he relapsed into silence, bowing his face upon his hands. As he sat thus a light step sounded behind him and a soft hand touched his shoulder.

"Another headache, papa?"

Pearl had come in quietly. She was indeed a pretty girl. Not handsome or queenly, but petite and bewitching.

Martel Molina looked up with a start.

"Not exactly a headache," he said, somewhat coldly. "I was thinking of you. Sit down. I wish to speak with you."

She detected something unusual in his voice, and looked at him inquiringly, as she sat down in the chair toward which he pointed.

"Thinking of me?" she repeated. "Why, papa, how could you spare the time? It is seldom that you think of anything but business."

He looked steadily at her. There was a light in his cold gray eyes that made her uneasy. She felt a vague foreboding that he was about to speak of something of an unpleasant nature.

"The time has come, Pearl, when I must think of you. It is my duty to look after the welfare of my only child."

She laughed a little in an uneasy way.

"Then I have really become of some importance?" she exclaimed.

Again Molina drummed on his desk. He was at a loss just how to approach the matter of which he wished to speak. Finally, he faced her squarely, saying:

"Pearl, I spoke to you of Horace Kelnot yesterday."

She caught her breath a little. So this was why she had so suddenly become of importance!

"Yes, papa."

"I was pained to learn that you do not regard Mr. Kelnot favorably."

"I honor him as a gentleman and my father's friend."

"He is more than that. I never told you of the time that he saved me from the hands of a pair of highway robbers. One of the fellows had me down and was about to cut my throat when Kelnot appeared. Empty-handed, he pitched into them both and drove them away. I did not tell you of this adventure, for I did not wish to cause you any unnecessary alarm just then."

Why did he tell her now? She knew only too well. Just then it was his object to present Horace Kelnot in as favorable light as possible.

He watched her face closely to note the result of his words. He came near uttering an exclamation of disappointment, for he fancied that his words had failed to have the desired effect.

"Horace Kelnot did what any brave man would have done," she said. "I honor and respect him for doing that. Knowing this, I shall hereafter endeavor to overcome my aversion of him as far as possible."

This was not just what Martel Molina had hoped for, and he could not quite repress a scowl of vexation and disappointment.

"But, Pearl, you know that Horace Kelnot has asked for your hand in marriage. He asked my permit to win you if possible. I gladly granted him the privilege. But you repulsed all of his approaches. When he asked you to be his wife, you declined."

"Which would have been the end of it with most gentlemen," flashed Pearl.

Molina continued, calmly:

"When it came about that he was obliged to speak of the matter, he told me of his failure. I was surprised, and promised to speak with you. I did so, and you flatly refused to have anything to do with Horace Kelnot, or even to consider the matter. I was amazed at your utter disregard of my wishes, and gave you time to think it over. Pearl, I do not wish you to be hasty in this matter, for I have no desire to be harsh with you."

The girl's eyes flashed and a half-defiant look came over her face. Never before had her father attempted to mold her will to suit his fancy. She had always been permitted to do pretty much as she pleased, and was in one sense a spoiled child.

"Father," she said, earnestly, "do not attempt to force me to accept for a husband a man whom I do not, cannot like—one who fills me with a strange feeling of dread and aversion

whenever he approaches me. Horace Kelnot is a handsome man and apparently a gentleman, but he is not a person toward whom I could ever feel the least affection."

Again Martel Molina drummed nervously on the desk beside him. He knitted his brows and stared fixedly at his pretty daughter.

"It will be more difficult than I anticipated," he thought. "But she must give up that Craddoc, even if she will not accept Kelnot."

Aloud he said:

"Pearl, you must know that I would do nothing but what I thought for your good. I tell you plainly that I consider Horace Kelnot a good match and any young lady is fortunate who gets him."

"A sort of capital prize in the matrimonial lottery," with a touch of scorn.

"This is no light matter," declared the mine-owner, sternly. "I wish you to look at it seriously, not with your natural flippancy."

Pearl arose and came to his side, passing one arm around his neck.

"Indeed, dear father, it is a serious matter for me. Do you think that I have no heart's desire in regard to the man whom I would choose as my husband?"

Now it was coming. He had dreaded it for some time, but now he nerved himself for what he felt sure would follow.

"But you must know, my dear girl, that a child is not always capable of choosing proper companions without the direction of older and more experienced persons."

She started from him.

"A child!" she cried. "Am I always to be regarded as a child? Am I never to be acknowledged capable of choosing for myself?"

He rubbed his hands nervously together, the set look showing more plainly upon his face. Surely now was the time to speak.

"Pearl, listen. I am about to speak of a matter that has pained me somewhat."

She caught a swift breath, and he continued:

"I know of your occasional meetings with Eric Craddoc among the hills, whither you ride so often. You have been seen with him. Yet you have never mentioned to me that you met him there."

His last words were full of reproach. She shrank back a little as if hurt by them.

He knew. She had often thought that she would tell him of Eric, but he was always so busy. Their meetings at first had been quite accidental. Some little misadventure had served to make them acquainted. He was a handsome, gallant fellow, and she had learned to look forward with interest to the next time that she should see him. Within her heart she had acknowledged that she more than admired the gallant young man. She had even dared to think that perhaps she might learn to care for him even more than as a friend. If he proved good and true he might become a lover, a husband. Indeed, little Pearl's pretty head was not free from romance.

She made a motion to speak, but her father quickly continued:

"Who is this Craddoc? A scamp, an adventurer I am willing to wager. He has come here to ply his crafty schemes. Perhaps he is a gambler. If so, he has been shrewd enough to let the cards alone while here. And for what reason? Because he has spotted larger game—a wealthy man's daughter."

"Pearl, you must not be deceived by this smooth-tongued scoundrel. If you have not judgment enough to shun him, then I shall step between the wolf and his prey. I forbid you speaking to Eric Craddoc again."

The mine-owner had worked himself into a white heat. He felt that the time had arrived when he should show his authority.

Pearl's face flushed and then became very white. She stared at him with wide-open eyes. Never had she known him to show such emotion before.

"Father," she cried, helplessly.

He looked up at her, his face set and determined.

"You have no right to speak so of him—"

He leaped to his feet.

"Have no right to!" he almost shouted. "Have no right to protect my daughter from a scheming scoundrel? We will see as to that! Girl, go to your room!"

She gave him one strange wild look and then passed from the room. Once beyond her father's sight and hearing, she burst into tears. With her handkerchief to her eyes she passed up the stairs and entered her own room.

The window was open, and a lamp, turned low down, was standing on a little round table. As the girl stepped into the room she was suddenly seized in a powerful grasp, and, ere she could cry out, a heavy cloth was thrown over her head. Then she was lifted and borne toward the open window.

So sudden had been the attack that for a time Pearl was utterly robbed of power and did not offer to make any resistance. Possibly her captor thought she had fainted.

Through the window, down a ladder and around the corner of the house. There the kidnapper found a horse, and in an indescribably

short space of time he was upon the animal's back, dashing down the street with the girl held like a huge bundle in his arms.

With a sudden movement, Pearl succeeded in getting her head from beneath the cloth. Then she shrieked out a wild cry for help, which was cut short as the cloth was again jerked over her head.

A terrible oath burst from the kidnapper's lips as he saw a dark mass of human beings come pouring out of the Silver Palace into the circle of red light shed by the colored glass globe above the door.

CHAPTER VII.

RESCUE AND ESCAPE.

THE crowd heard that wild cry; they heard the sharp clatter of a horse's hoofs and saw the galloping animal coming down the street. Some of them seemed paralyzed, but one or two leaped into sudden action.

Eric Craddoc had entered the Silver Palace in time to witness the fight between Hustler Harry and the bully of the camp. Craddoc had also observed Hickory Bill's friends, Posey Pete and Casper Gonzalo, as they gilded here and there among the spectators, speaking a low word now and then.

"They are up to some dirty trick," was Eric's unexpressed opinion. "I wonder what it is?"

He soon discovered, for he witnessed the accusation of the victorious cowboy and the sudden rush of the crowd as they threw themselves upon Harry. In a moment he penetrated the scheme. Governed by a hidden power, the crowd was about to attempt to lynch the Man from High Notch!

At the same instant there were several others who saw through the trick. Like Eric Craddoc, they all attempted to reach the cowboy's side that they might show their friendship in an attempt to protect the Hustler from his foes. As a result, it seemed that the entire crowd leaped upon him, frenzied for his blood.

With the throng, Eric Craddoc was swept toward the door. As they poured out into the street, he heard that sharp cry for help and recognized the voice!

Harry also heard the cry, and his keen eyes perceived the oncoming horse, its rider and the dark form in his arms.

With an answering cry, the Man from High Notch sprung suddenly into action. He seemed to have the strength of a giant, for he hurled those who were clinging to him to the right and left as if they were so many babies. In an instant he was free.

Lower down the steps the crowd was thick between the cowboy and the street. A second wild cry broke from his lips, and he shot into the air, sailing out over the heads of those before him as a bird might have done! It was a wonderful leap, and ere a hand could be raised to stop him, he was in the street.

Lightly as cat he alighted, and swiftly as a cat he darted forward. Not an instant too soon to intercept the kidnapper.

The villain witnessed that splendid leap from the hotel steps, and saw the dark form springing forward to intercept him.

With a savage oath he attempted to draw a revolver, but he was so incumbered by the maiden in his arms, that for one moment he failed.

That moment was enough. Hustling Harry had the horse by the bit.

"Hoop-la! I'm Hustler Harry, the Hard Nut Crack! Whoa up, ye pesky critter!"

With an iron hand, he forced the horse back upon its haunches, bringing it to an almost dead halt. Then the kidnapper succeeded in jerking forth a revolver.

There was a red spout of flame, a sharp report, but the Hustler was untouched. In his excitement, the kidnapper had missed.

Then the desperate fellow saw a second form nearly upon him, and he realized that if he escaped there must be no delay.

Repeating the snarled oath, he relinquished his hold upon the maiden, and slid from the horse's back.

Eric Craddoc was on hand, and caught Pearl's falling form in his arms, at the same time shouting to Harry:

"Don't let the wretch escape!"

Like a frightened deer the baffled kidnapper fled for the nearest shelter, hoping to put one of the shanties between his foes and himself, and then escape in the darkness.

Harry did not notice this move soon enough to stop the flying desperado with a bullet, but he sent a lead ball after the fellow just as he disappeared round the corner of a shanty.

Eric Craddoc sunk upon his knees, and swiftly removed the stifling cloth from around Pearl's head. He uttered a cry as he saw her face revealed by the red light from the globe above the door of the Silver Palace, the rays of which barely reached the spot.

She was conscious, and soon succeeded in gasping:

"Eric!"

"My darling!" he murmured, hoarsely, scarcely knowing what he said. "You are safe!"

"Then it is really er female, pard?" said the

voice of Harry, as the cowboy peered over Eric's shoulder, still holding the horse by the bit.

"Glory ter good luck, we saved her!"

"You did," was Eric's swift, unselfish reply. "If you had not reached this spot just as you did, I wouldn't have been able to rescue her. It will be a long day before I forget it, and I may some time have a chance to show my gratitude."

"Don't menshun it," laughed Harry. "I'll dance at ther weddin'. That'll satisfy me."

"You are in danger here—"

"I reckon ye'r shoutin' now, pard. Ther critters are cumin', heads up an' tails risin'. I don't believe it's healthy fer me to tarry hyer. Yer fist, pard!"

For one half instant their hands met in a hearty grip. Then Harry said, softly:

"Good-by. Take keer of ther leetle gal."

The next moment he leaped upon the back of the kidnapper's horse. The crowd seemed to be all around him. Half a dozen hands reached to grasp the bridle.

"Out of the trail!" shouted the cowboy. "Cl'ar ther track fer ther Hard Nut from High Notch. Scoot, ye scrawny burro!"

Away sprung the horse, away into the darkness, a mocking laugh floating back from the lips of Harry.

Some one sent an ineffectual shot after the disappearing cowboy.

"Durn ther cross-grained luck!" mumbled Posey Pete, as he stared down the street. "The p'isen critter's got clean away."

"Durn ther cow-puncher!" cried another. "Sumbuddy git arter ther dirty cuss w'at war tryin' ter kerry off this hyer gal. He's our sardine. Foller me."

The speaker started at a run toward the spot where the baffled kidnapper had disappeared, and was followed by half-a-score of fellows with drawn weapons in their hands.

"What is the trouble? What has happened?"

Both Eric and Pearl recognized that voice. Horace Kelnot stood beside them. The girl could not repress a slight shiver as her eyes rested upon that tall, handsome figure.

"Miss Molina!" exclaimed the proprietor of the Silver Palace. "You here?"

Briefly Eric Craddoc outlined what had happened, using as few words as possible. Handy Horace seemed amazed.

"I heard the excitement in the saloon, and was just going to see what it meant," he cried. "I was a moment too late to witness this affair on the street. Miss Molina, I congratulate you on your escape."

"Thank you!" she murmured, faintly.

"But I fear you are injured," hastily added Kelnot. "If you will permit me, I will see you safely home."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, starting up with sudden strength. "I am not hurt; I am all right. I thank you for your kind offer, but Mr. Craddock will accompany me."

Horace Kelnot shot Eric a mad glance and suppressed an oath on his lips.

The young Easterner expressed his thanks by softly pressing Pearl's hand as he assisted her to arise.

"You have a responsible charge, Mr. Craddock," observed Kelnot, stiffly, as he eyed the young man sharply. "Have a care that nothing happens to her, or you shall answer to me."

Eric uttered a little whistle of amazement.

"Pardon me," he said, with a touch of sarcasm. "I did not know that you were her guardian."

Again Handy Horace shut his teeth hard to keep back an oath. Inwardly he vowed that the rash young Easterner should answer for his insolence.

"I am afraid you are not yet accustomed to Western ways, young man," he remarked quietly. "In a camp like this, every honest man considers himself the guardian of any lady who may reside in the place."

Eric bowed; he did not care to make further talk. A moment later he walked away, with Pearl clinging to his arm.

Handy Horace watched them till they disappeared in the darkness.

"Curse that presumptuous young hound!" muttered the proprietor of the Silver Palace.

"He dares to step into my path! We will see what the result wil be. That girl shall become mine—I swear it!"

Then he wheeled and made his way down the street in the opposite direction.

Toward Pearl's home the young couple slowly walked. As they moved along, the girl told Eric how she came to be in the power of the kidnapper, carefully avoiding speaking of the unpleasant interview with her father.

"Oh, Mr. Craddock!" she exclaimed. "How fortunate it was that you happened to hear my cry!"

"I am afraid you give me too much credit, Pearl—Miss Molina."

"Call me Pearl if you like," she said, softly. "Surely you have won that privilege to-night."

"Thank you, Pearl," he lightly yet earnestly breathed. "But, again, I say that you give me too much credit."

"How so, Mr. Craddock?"

"That will never do," he declared, reproach-

fully. "If I am to call you Pearl, you must call me Eric."

She laughed a little, and said:

"It shall be Eric and Pearl then."

"Those names sound well together," he asserted. Then he felt a little alarmed for fear that he had said too much.

The girl made no response, and Eric added:

"You are indebted for your escape wholly to that strange cowboy. But for his prompt action, the kidnapper might have got away. I do not claim any honor for the fortunate ending of your very exciting adventure."

"I am certain that you are too generous, Mr. Craddoc—Eric. Of course I was unable to see what happened. All I know is that when the stifling cloth was removed I found myself in your arms."

They soon reached the house, and, as Pearl was still weak from her recent excitement, Eric entered with her. They found Martel Molina still sitting at his desk.

The mine-owner leaped to his feet as his eyes fell upon Eric Craddoc.

"What—what does this mean?" he stammered.

As swiftly as possible, Pearl told him what had happened, not failing to give Eric a fair share of credit for her rescue.

Molina was amazed. At first he could hardly credit the story, but his daughter's earnestness soon convinced him that it was true.

"The dastardly ruffian!" cried the alarmed and angered mine-owner. "He shall be captured and punished. I will offer a reward for his apprehension."

Then in a cold, formal way he thanked Eric for what he had done, and bade him good-night. The young man was quite chilled by Molina's manner and at once took his departure. He was cheered however by a parting word, a smile and a soft hand-pressure from Pearl.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CABIN AGAINST THE CLIFF.

WHEN Hustler Harry shot out the lights of the saloon, Old Shark, the Shadow, lay upon his back on the floor. Ere he could hurl aside the table and regain his feet the place was in darkness.

"He will make a break for the door to escape before the place is lighted again," thought the detective. "Am I to be baffled at the very moment when I should be putting the irons on the fellow?"

This was a natural conclusion, but, Dan Shark misjudged his man.

Carefully avoiding those who were rushing around in the darkness, the detective made his way toward the door. By the light of the red globe without he saw several forms dash out into the street. One of them he felt sure was his man.

Ere he passed out beneath that red light he paused an instant, instinctively. What if Jack Tackaloo was out there in the darkness waiting for him to appear—waiting with a revolver in his hand?

"The wretch will shoot to kill," he confessed; "but I must take my chances. This is a chance game, anyway, but I've pulled through so far. I have pulled down many men fully as desperate as this Tackaloo."

With his own hand on a revolver, he hurried out. He did not pause within the circle of light, but hastened onward into the darkness.

A light shone from a little shop window some distance down the street, and revealed to the detective a passing form.

"My game!" breathed Shark, exultantly.

"I was right."

But he had been deceived by a general resemblance.

Like a shadow, indeed, the famous detective glided along, following the dark form ahead.

"He is playing right into my hand," muttered Shark. "If I am not mistaken he has friends in this camp, although he pretends to be a stranger. He may have been living here in this place for some time as a common miner, only to suddenly don that disguise and assume the character of a cowboy."

Onward went the detective, keeping that dark form in view. The man ahead seemed to avoid the shanty lights as much as possible. Out beyond the thickest of the slab buildings went the two men. Toward the cut that led out of the pocket at the south they moved.

The detective saw the light which shone from the window of the cabin at the foot of the cliff, and noticed that the man he was following seemed to be aiming straight for that point.

Several times the man in advance glanced around in a suspicious manner, and had not Old Shark been keenly on the alert, he would surely have been detected. Each time the experienced shadower sunk silently to the ground.

The detective began to feel a strange curiosity in the movements of the man he was pursuing. He hardly knew whether to close in with him and attempt his capture or not. While he was in doubt, the fellow reached the cabin door. Once more he looked back toward the camp, then he turned and rapped softly on the door in a peculiar manner.

There was a moment's pause, then the man rapped again, but differently than at first. The

door was opened, the man passed in so swiftly that Shark did not get a fair view of him, and once more the door was closed.

"Well, there," muttered the detective. "If I am not mistaken, I have holed my badger! I shall stop right around the mouth of the orifice till he comes forth again."

At that moment the light seemed to suddenly vanish from the window.

"What's up?" Shark asked himself, with some curiosity. "I will go forward and investigate."

But, even as he started forward, he could not repress a slight shiver as he thought that it was possible he had been detected by the man he had followed. Perhaps the fellow was laying behind those walls, peering forth from a loop-hole with a rifle at his shoulder, ready to send a ball through his tracker when the right time came.

Cautiously Old Shark crept forward. When he came nearer to the cabin, he discovered that the light within had not been extinguished, but that a heavy curtain had been drawn across the little window. He drew a breath of relief as he noted this.

Soon he reached the cabin. With a revolver in his hand he crouched near the door and listened. He heard a crooning sound as of some person singing softly.

"I would give something to peer into this hut," declared the detective, to himself. "I wonder if there is not another window?"

He passed around one corner and examined the wall, but found nothing to reward him for his trouble.

"Well, I will examine the other side."

He cautiously retraced his steps, taking care not to be observed skulking around the place. It was well that he did so, for as he peered through the darkness toward the camp, he fancied he caught the outlines of an approaching form. Quickly he skurried around the corner and crouched close to the ground, gazing keenly through the darkness.

He was not deceived. Some one was, indeed, approaching.

The tread of heavy feet came to Old Shark's ears, and soon he plainly saw the dark form of a man. The unknown advanced straight to the door of the cabin.

Listening, the detective heard the same peculiar knock given by the other man, at first. Then a voice, evidently that of an old woman, demanded:

"Who is there?"

The man crouching beside the cabin took note of the reply. It was four distinct raps.

The door creaked a little as it swung open, and the woman's voice said:

"Enter, Number Four!"

"Well, this is beginning to become interesting," softly observed the detective. "I am really beginning to enjoy it."

He arose to his feet and looked for the window. He found it with little difficulty, but to his disappointment, it was closely curtained like the other.

Suddenly back in the camp he heard excited voices, then two wild yells, followed a moment later by two pistol-shots, with a brief interval between them.

"Something has broken loose there," thought Old Shark, as he again crouched close to the ground and listened.

A few moments later the sound of a swiftly galloping horse came to his ears.

"The animal is coming this way," muttered the man beside the cabin.

He was right. Down the street came the flying horse, and a few seconds later Old Shark saw the animal as it swept past and disappeared into the black darkness of the cut.

It was riderless!

"A runaway," was the detective's mental decision.

He little dreamed that a few seconds before Hustler Harry had bestrode that very horse.

After listening a few moments more, Old Shark began to search for a crack or knot-hole through which he could obtain a view of the interior of the cabin. To his satisfaction, he soon discovered a tiny crack well down toward the ground. A small ray of light shone out through this rent, causing Old Shark to breathe an exclamation of pleasure. An instant later he was peering into the room.

The shanty was divided by a partition and the front room contained the light. To the detective's surprise, neither of the two men who had entered the place were in that room. An old woman was there moving about in a manner which soon convinced the spy that she was blind.

While Old Shark was peering through the crack there came another knock on the door. With outstretched hands the woman advanced to the door and demanded:

"Who is there?"

Listening, the detective heard eight distinct raps.

The woman opened the door and a man stepped into the room. When she closed and fastened the door, he said:

"Where are my brothers?"

The woman replied:

"Many of them are within the council-chamber."

Then the man crossed the floor, opened the door which was set in the partition between the two rooms, passed on and the door closed behind him.

"Well, the interest deepens," was the watcher's softly whispered observation. "I have struck a full-grown mystery here, and I am going to sift it to the bottom as sure as my name is Dan Shark."

"Where have those fellows gone? Are they within that small back room, or have they gone further? I am willing to bet a little that they have gone further. If I am right, then this cabin must conceal an opening—the mouth of a cave—in the face of the cliff."

"Who are they and why do they meet here? I have been in Cimarron City less than forty-eight hours, yet I have heard of a strange secret league called the Brothers of the Red Heart. If I am not greatly mistaken, I have discovered the entrance to the secret retreat of this brotherhood, which is said to be composed of many of the prominent men of the camp. The Brothers of the Red Heart make the laws of Cimarron and run things pretty much as they choose."

"Jack Tackaloo entered this cabin. Then he must belong to this league. I may find my hands full in attempting to take him in out of the wet."

Another knock sounded on the door, and after the usual inquiry and response, the man was admitted. Old Shark observed that after the woman's question: "Who is there?" the fellow rapped five times.

"I see the idea," thought the spy. "Each man is numbered and raps his number."

He crept forward to the corner of the cabin, and lay close to the ground in such a position that he could see every dark form that entered. His mind was busy, and he almost spoke aloud a sudden question that came to him.

"Is there connection between that mark on Jack Tackaloo's arm and this strangely-named league? Why not? The Brothers of the Red Heart. There is a crimson heart-shaped birthmark on Tackaloo's left wrist. To me it seems significant."

Another dark form appeared and wrapped on the door. Then came the usual question followed by two raps.

"There must be special business on hand to call them in," thought Shark. "Still they come."

Another appeared and was admitted after rapping eleven times. For nearly an hour they continued to come at irregular intervals. The detective made a mental note of every number rapped and found that eleven men had entered the cabin, using the numbers up to thirteen, with the exception of nine and twelve. Although he waited for a long time neither of these numbers were rapped upon the door.

Old Shark made a sudden resolution.

"I am going to attempt to go in there!" he declared, decisively. "I will use one of the numbers that I have not heard. I may fail, for the men bearing those numbers may have entered ere I followed Jack Tackaloo to this spot. If I am lucky, I think I can deceive that old blind woman."

He wasted no time in hesitation, but advanced boldly upon the door and rapped upon it.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BROTHERS OF THE RED HEART.

It was a bold move, indeed, and one which no common man would have dared to make. But Dan Shark was not a common man. With him action swiftly followed thought, and he seldom regretted his moves.

When he rapped on the door, he imitated the knock which he had heard each man give. A moment later the old woman demanded:

"Who is there?"

Then Old Shark rapped nine times.

Almost immediately the door swung open and the woman said in a low tone:

"Enter, Number Nine."

The detective did not hesitate to obey, and the woman closed the door behind him. When this was done, she turned and seemed to stare inquiringly at him. Despite the fact that Old Shark was quite positive that the woman was blind, he could not repress a slight start as she seemed to peer at him in that sharp, inquiring way. He realized that he must say something, and so, clearing his throat, repeated the question that he had heard the others ask, disfiguring his voice:

"Where are my brothers?"

The old woman's sightless eyes seemed to scan him still more closely, and for a moment the detective almost fancied that she could see. Finally she said:

"Your voice is very hoarse to-night, Number Nine."

Old Shark gave utterance to an impatient growl and strode across the floor to the door of the back room. Instead of exciting the old woman's suspicion, this act seemed to allay it. In fact, the detective had acted his part better than he knew, for "Number Nine" was an impatient, surly fellow.

With no trouble at all he passed onward into the back room, closing the door behind him.

He found himself in utter darkness, but Old Shark was prepared for just such emergencies. From his pocket he drew forth a small luminous ball, about as large as a common hen's egg. This he held by a tiny cord. The ball seemed filled with liquid fire and shed a soft light which enabled the detective to examine anything within three or four feet of the strange little lantern.

Holding the luminous ball above his head, Old Shark advanced straight along a short, hall-like passage. He passed a door on the right and one on the left, both of which probably opened into small rooms. Then he came to what appeared to be the solid face of the cliff.

Holding his strange light close to the rock he examined it swiftly and closely. Its surface was scarred and seamed.

"I believe there is a secret door here," thought the detective.

At the same time he realized that he might be wrong. One of those side doors might lead to a room from which there was a passage into the secret cavern which he felt sure existed in that vicinity. Possibly the cave was reached by going down through a trap door into a cellar. But, Old Shark resolved to examine everything thoroughly as far as he went.

He was used to discovering springs by which secret doors were operated, and at once began to work around the wall with a short-bladed knife. Suddenly he did touch a hidden spring. Then slowly and noiselessly a great square mass of rock moved from him, showing a dark opening.

Repressing an expression of satisfaction, the detective stooped low down and entered the place. He soon stood erect within a narrow passage.

Hearing a sound behind him, he wheeled swiftly only to find that the entrance had closed of its own accord, probably worked by invisible weights and springs.

The bravest of men will at times experience feelings of fear, and for an instant Old Shark wished himself out of that dark place. But he choked down every thought of retreat and slowly advanced, holding the luminous globe above his head. His knife had been replaced by a self-acting revolver, and he was prepared for any sudden emergency.

The passage was narrow and winding, being not more than four feet wide by from seven to ten feet high.

Shark moved forward with the greatest caution, for he knew not how soon he might come upon some unlooked-for danger. But in that respect he was fortunate.

He had proceeded quite a distance when the sound of voices came to his ears. Hastily he placed the luminous ball in his pocket, and then stood still in the dense darkness, listening breathlessly.

Again the far-away murmur of voices came to his ears.

"The gang is not far away," he thought. "Now, old man, use your utmost caution."

Again he crept forward, keeping his left hand against the wall. The passage soon began to grow wider, but as he was in utter darkness, the detective was not aware of this fact.

The sound of voices became plainer as he advanced. Several times he paused to listen. He decided that the speakers were not conversing in low tones.

He finally turned a bend in the passage and saw a glow of light not far ahead. Redoubling his caution, he pressed forward.

He could now hear one man speaking in a tone which indicated that he probably was addressing several others.

Old Shark soon reached a point where he could gaze into a brilliantly-lighted cavern chamber. The chamber was not very large, and was circular in shape, although the walls were very irregular. Two swinging lamps were suspended from the roof. There were a number of rude benches which were occupied by dark-robed and masked figures. Standing upon a platform raised a foot or more above the level of the floor was a figure wearing a white robe and a white mask. This person was speaking, while his left hand rested on an altar-like structure beside him.

Upon the breast of each of the dark-robed figures was a crimson heart. From the peaked caps upon their heads dangled a short cord with a red ball at the end which looked like a huge drop of blood. There was also a crimson heart upon the breast of the white-robed figure. The altar-like structure was covered with a white cloth, upon the front of which were a dark skull and cross-bones.

Not a weapon of any kind was visible about the strange throng.

The detective's eyes glowed as they rested upon the peculiar scene. It was not the first time that he had witnessed the private meeting of some secret league.

The individual who wore the white robe was evidently the chief, and Old Shark started as he heard the man's voice.

"Jack Tackaloo, I'll venture something!" softly breathed the spy. "The fellow is now

speaking in his natural voice. As Hustler Harry he disguises his true voice in a measure."

"Our failure to-night to capture the prize through which we hoped to get our hands on the Red Star Mine is unfortunate," said the chief. "Number Five reports that he did his level best, and lost the game just when he seemed to have everything in his fingers."

"But it is not that of which I wish most to speak. Dangers are multiplying around us. Some of the Brotherhood remember the unfortunate ending of that job we tackled in Squaw Canyon, away up in Montana, nearly a year ago. We failed to secure the yellow wealth which we desired and a rash old man met his death by a sudden blow. Brothers, that tragedy is not forgotten, and to-day a Nemesis is on our trail. You all know of whom I speak, as this matter has been brought up before. This Nemesis must be removed in some manner."

"But more to be dreaded than all others is the detective who is in Cimarron City to-night. I am confident that he is here to demolish this Brotherhood. In fact, I am positive that this is true. He is employed by some of the moneyed men of the camp—men who are deadly enemies of the Brothers of the Red Heart. His name is Dan Shark, and he is commonly known as Old Shark, the Shadow. This man is one of the most crafty and determined human bloodhounds in existence. If he has come here to hunt us down and is allowed to live he will overthrow the very mountains but he will accomplish his purpose."

"There is yet another danger, of which I will not speak, as it menaces me more than the league. But I have said enough to show you our position. The time has arrived to strike in our own defense, and strike swift and sure. Let no man hesitate to do his duty. Let us all remember our sacred oaths, and also remember that whatever we do is done for our own safety. It is death to our foes or death to us!"

The man stopped speaking, but stood gazing at the throng. He seemed to be noting the effect of his words, but if this was the case, he could not have derived much satisfaction from the grim silence which the dark cloaked figures maintained.

As for Old Shark, he was not a little surprised by what he had heard. His object in coming to Cimarron had been far from hunting down the Brothers of the Red Heart. In fact, he had known nothing of the existence of such an organization until after he reached the camp. But he fancied that he knew the object of the white-robed chief.

"I am after Jack Tackaloo," inwardly soliloquized the spy. "Tackaloo is chief of this infernal league, and if he succeeds in convincing them that I am here to hunt down the band, every man will feel an interest in my removal. Thus the job may be done without Tackaloo himself striking a blow."

"Brothers," the chief again spoke up, "it is not necessary that we should choose a certain individual to execute the will of the league. We should all be willing to strike for our own safety. Let every one who will do so hold up his left hand—the one nearest his heart."

Up went the left hands of the dark-robed Brothers. The chief also raised his left hand. As he did so, the flowing sleeve of the white gown fell away from the man's wrist and the brilliant light showed Old Shark something that caused him to clasp his hands over his mouth to repress an exultant exclamation.

The crimson heart-shaped birthmark was there!

"My bird!" whispered the detective, with intense satisfaction. "I thought so before; now I know."

"Good!" exclaimed the chief, as the Brothers of the Red Heart lowered their hands. "Every man has expressed a willingness to do his duty, and I do not think one will fail. Is there anything further to come before the meeting?"

"It is time for me to be getting out of this," thought Old Shark. "My throat would probably be cut in an instant if I were discovered here."

Then a sudden paralyzing thought came to him. He had succeeded in opening the secret door from the outer side, but could he repeat the act from the inner side? The chances were that he could not.

"It would mean sure death to be caught at the narrow end of this passage," thought Shark. "If I should go there and try to open the door, I might fail until they came and found me. Then I would be caught like a rat in trap. I could only sell my life as dearly as possible, but I do not believe in that kind of business. I have a desire to kick around a little longer."

But what was to be done?

Old Shark resolved to discover what he could do. Waiting to hear nothing further, he turned back into the passage. The light from the lighted chamber had shown him that the passage was at least ten feet wide at the mouth. Might it not be wider in places? It was possible that he could find some place of concealment in a dark niche.

From his position at the mouth of the passage the detective had seen the mouths of other dark passages which opened into the chamber, but

neither of these could be reached without stepping out into the light, where one would be seen by the entire band.

When he had proceeded a short distance, Old Shark took the luminous globe from his pocket. This he held low down, and peered sharply to the right and left as he hurried onward.

"If I cannot find a place of concealment there I will try the secret door," came faintly through the desperate detective's lips. "If I fail there—"

He did not complete the sentence. He knew well enough what failure meant.

Suddenly a little gasp of pleasure came from Old Shark's lips. He espied a deep fissure in the wall. Just outside of this fissure lay a boulder.

"Thank Heaven!" he breathed, and within his soul he felt that it was almost a special provision of Providence.

He lost no time in climbing over the boulder and crouching down behind it in the darkness. It was a capital hiding-place. His chance of being discovered there was small, indeed.

Placing the luminous ball in his pocket, he remained perfectly quiet and waited. He had quite given up all hope of capturing Jack Tackaloo just then if, indeed, he did so that night. He would wait until he was well out of the den of the Red Heart Brotherhood before he attempted it.

Nearly thirty minutes passed ere he heard the tramp of advancing feet. Lower crouched the daring and fortunate spy, and silently the unsuspecting men filed past his place of concealment. Without a word they passed on, and Old Shark drew a long breath of relief.

For more than thirty minutes the detective remained in his place of concealment. Then feeling quite sure that all of the band had left the cave, he arose and climbed over the boulder into the passage.

"Now to get out of here," he muttered, as he again produced the luminous ball.

A few minutes later he was fumbling around the secret door at the mouth of the passage.

For more than an hour he searched for the means of opening the door. At the end of that time he found that he had accomplished nothing.

With an exclamation of disgust and despair he stamped fiercely on the ground. Then he was amazed to see the heavy door swing toward him. His foot had struck a block of loose stone less than six inches square beneath which was a lever which connected with the mechanism that worked the door.

With great haste Old Shark crouched and passed through the opening. The door closed silently behind him.

He walked along the short, narrow passage and listened at the door which opened into the front room. The regular breathing of a sleeping person came to his ears.

Silently he opened the door and stole into the room. The light had been extinguished, but the little ball, as he swung it slowly round his head dimly showed him the room. There was no one save himself in it. Then he realized that the heavy breathing had come from one of the rooms with which the doors that opened into the passage communicated.

Cautiously the detective stole across the floor, unfastened the outer door, and passed out into the night.

CHAPTER X.

BLACK JOE ON HAND.

"Fo' de lub ob Hebben, missy, I'se seen him down dar shore!"

"Whom do you mean?" demanded Ruth Foscolo, catching the excited darky by the arm. "Not Philip Barret?"

"Hope I may die ef 'twarn't!" was Black Joe's emphatic assertion, as he stood before her, still panting for breath after his hard climb.

The girl's eyes glowed, and she trembled in every limb.

"You are sure?" she panted; "you are sure—sure?"

"Shore's ye'r' breafin'. I des see'd 'im wif my two eyes, an' I heerd 'im talk. He's down dar, I tells ye, an' I knows w'at 'm sayin'."

For a few moments Ruth was too excited to question the darky further. But she soon grew calmer, and succeeded in drawing out the story of Joe's adventures. The old negro made a rather broken narrative, but the girl understood it fully.

"Fate has sent him here!" she declared. "The time has come for me to do the work of vengeance. May the memory of my poor old father, stricken down by that wretch's cowardly hand, nerve my arm!"

"Amen!" said Black Joe solemnly.

"Joe, I am going down there."

"Is yo' goin' now?"

"Yes, at once. I cannot delay. If I draw back now with him so near, my resolution may fail. I have sworn to avenge that dearest and kindest of men. Come!"

The negro was still breathing heavily from the hard climb, but, Ruth took no notice of that. Her thoughts were fixed on the accomplishment of her deadly object.

She extinguished the light within the little cabin, and they passed out into the darkness.

For a moment the girl paused on the brink of the precipice, and gazed downward toward the spot where many twinkling lights marked the location of Cimarron City in the dark abyss below.

"Will to-night end the trail of vengeance?" she murmured. "When he is punished for that terrible crime, I shall be ready for the last long sleep. What then shall I have to live for? He was my light, my life—and for gold he slew my poor old father! Once I loved Philip Barret as I did my own life! Oh, Philip! Philip! How I loved you!"

Her voice broke in a half-sob. She stopped and stamped one foot sharply on the ground.

"All that is past!" she cried. "I vowed I would never think of it again. I have tried to crush the thoughts of love from my heart. Not that I love him still, but it makes me shudder when I think that I ever loved such a man—a murderer! I hate him now!—hate him with all the intensity of my soul! My very life is centered in this terrible hatred which I feel. My time has come!"

Without another word, she turned and began the descent, Black Joe following close behind her. Down the difficult trail she made her way with a rapidity that was surprising under the circumstances. Something seemed to guide her feet. Behind her the negro came panting, stumbling and gasping.

"Fo' de bressed Lawd, missy, am ye tryin' ter run down dis year mounting?" he managed to mumble. "I 'clare ter goodness you'll des fall an' broke dat dar pritty neck ob yo's—yo' wull shuah!"

She paid no heed to his words. On she went, and still Black Joe grumbled:

"Don' like dis yer temp'in' fate, I don't. Ef yo' don' fall, I se des plum' shore ter. One ob us gwine ter be er goner afore we gits down dar. Yo' des mark ole Joe's words."

But they reached the bottom of the descent in safety. As they did so Hustling Harry's wild yells as he broke from the crowd in front of the Silver Palace came to their ears. They paused and listened and a moment later they heard two shots.

"Reckun dey're habbin' sort ob a serynade ober dar," observed Black Joe. "Tain't often dat yo' hears a chicken squak like dat yar. Mus' des split his froat wide open."

Ruth was panting from the hurried descent, but she again started forward, saying briefly:

"Come!"

Onward they went once more, the negro puffing like an overworked horse.

They had not advanced far before the hoof-strokes of a galloping horse came to their ears. They both paused a moment to listen, but little did Ruth Foscolo dream that the very person she sought had leaped upon that horse's back and escaped from the crowd near the Silver Palace. They listened until the sound of the galloping horse was lost in the distance, as the animal went dashing away through the cut that led out of the pocket.

A few minutes later they paused near the Silver Palace.

"Dat's de place," declared Joe. "In dar frough de do' whar de red light am."

From her bosom Ruth drew forth a heavy veil and swiftly adjusted it over her face. Then she turned to Joe.

"You remain outside," she commanded. "If you were to go in with me it would only attract more attention. If I find him there, I may never come out alive. Should this happen, see that my body is decently buried. Good-by, Joe!"

At first the darky was determined not to allow her to enter the place alone, but she insisted and he finally gave in. At the thought that she might not come forth alive Black Joe nearly broke down. It was a touching separation.

As she passed in through the door she met a man who looked at her keenly. He came out, and catching a glimpse of the negro, uttered an exclamation, wheeled and went back.

Within the saloon Ruth Foscolo paid no heed to the curious glances bestowed upon her. Unheeding the surprise that her appearance caused she moved about among the throng, searching for the man whom she had sworn to slay.

The saloon was well filled. A throng of thirsty individuals crowded around the bar, behind which the dispenser of "liquid refreshments" was showing his ability to "please the public."

The card tables were nearly all in use and two faro lay-outs were doing a good business.

Here and there moved the veiled girl, gazing sharply into the faces of those present. And all the while the man who had met her at the door kept her in view.

Three times the girl went round the room, but her search was unrewarded. She could not repress a sigh of strangely mingled regret and relief.

"Pardon me, ma'am; war ye lookin' fur sum-buddy?"

It was the man who had met her at the door that asked the question. She bowed, but did not speak.

He approached a step nearer, saying in a low tone.

"I know who ye'r lookin' fer."

She gazed at him sharply.

"Kem' over hyer," said the man. "I kin tell ye of him."

She followed him to an unused deal table. They both sat down.

The man was not a very pleasant-looking fellow, and Ruth did not like his appearance as he fixed his small black eyes upon her.

"Ye'r' huntin' arter one w'at wears er red heart on his lef' wrist," asserted the man.

Ruth made no motion of denial or affirmation.

"I kin tell ye whar he is," continued the fellow. "I follered him ter ther very spot whar he now is. I war watchin' fer er chance ter stick a knife in his back, but didn't git it."

Ruth shuddered.

"You would murder him!" she gasped.

"As ther p'izen snake did my pore brother!" gritted the man. "Blood fer blood's my motto."

"And this same red-handed fiend slew my father!" fiercely breathed the girl. "He is mine! No other hand shall cut short his thread of life! I will pay you well to lead me to him."

The man hesitated.

"Waal," he drawled, "I don't know's I keer how ther critter croaks so he does it. If you fix him, ye'll only save me ther job. I'll pint ye ter him. I'll leave ther saloon now an' you kin foller pritty soon. I'll meet yer out thar."

He arose and sauntered carelessly out of the saloon. When he passed through the door, he looked around for the negro, but Black Joe was not to be seen.

"So much ther better," muttered the fellow. "Ef I git this she critter out of ther way, I reckon ther boss'll pay me fur my trubble. I c'u'd doctor both her and ther nig, but I don't keer northin' 'bout ther black one."

A few minutes later he was joined by Ruth.

"Where is he?" demanded the girl. "Don't attempt to deceive me, for if you do you will hear from this."

She displayed a small revolver.

"I'll show ther critter to ye fast ernuff," was the man's assertion. "He's down byer aways."

Together they passed down the street, Ruth keenly on the alert for treachery. They had gone quite a distance and were passing along the darkest part of the street when the desperado suddenly tripped her, flinging himself upon her as she fell, and seizing her by the throat.

An instant later the treacherous brute received a terrible blow upon the head that stretched him senseless on the ground.

"Hi, golly!" exclaimed the familiar voice of Black Joe. "Reckun sich trash's dat ar can't pull de wool ober ole Joe's eyes—no sar! I smell-ed de woodchuck at de fu's' ob de game."

As the negro helped his mistress to her feet, he added:

"Ole Joe wucks in mighty handy don' he oncet in a wile? I smelled dis coon's game an' drapped him wif er club. Reckun he'll hab a sore head in the mawnin."

"Joe," said Ruth, earnestly, "I believed you saved my life. This man is probably one whom Philip Barret hired to assassinate me."

The unconscious ruffian at their feet was "Number Nine" of the Brothers of the Red Heart.

CHAPTER XI. UNCLE PETER HODGE.

"HEY there, mister!"

The startled stage-driver glanced around, half-expecting to see a masked man with a cocked and leveled rifle, and hear the order, "Hands up!" But he was agreeably disappointed.

The man who had hailed was seated on a large stone by the roadside. He was dressed in a suit of ill-fitting gray, and at his feet on the ground was an old-fashioned "carpet-bag." He held his battered old bell-crowned beaver in his left hand, while he vigorously mopped his perspiring face with a large red bandanna handkerchief. As the driver espied this individual he stopped wiping his face, and swung his handkerchief toward the stage.

"Howld on there, mister!" cried the man on the rock. "Can't yeou give a feller a ride?"

The stranger had a rather jolly-looking face, and was evidently a man of about fifty. His long hair was well mixed with gray. Dusty Snif, the driver, took a rapid survey of the strange individual, and with a sudden fit of good humor, drew up promptly.

"We hain't runnin' er free hearse this quarter," declared Dusty Snif; "but ef ye've got the rocks ter pay, w'y, ye kin ride."

"Wal, neow, what do yeou think I am, anyway?" demanded the stranger, with a good-natured grin. "Do I look like a dead corpse? I don't want ter ride in no hearse, yit awhile. If that's a hearse, I guess I kin fut it to the next village."

Dusty Snif looked at the man curiously. Just then a nervous passenger thrust his head out of the window and demanded to know the trouble. Paying no attention to the question, the driver called out to the wayfarer:

"Whar'd ye cum frum, pard? I reckon ye'r a stranger in these hyer parts."

"Wal, neow, yeou are kirect," admitted the man by the rock, as he arose to his feet and

kicked out first one foot and then the other, in the attempt to shake down his short, tight-fitting pantaloons. "I'm frum Maine, the ole Pine Tree State, an' my name's Hodge—Peter Hodge. Peer'aps yeou've heerd on ther Hodges?"

"Can't say that I've ever hed that playshur. But, pardner, if ye want er ride, an' kin pay yer way, climb up hyer side o' me."

"Guess I kin pay if 't don't cost more'n a quarter," laughed Peter Hodge, as he grasped his carpet-bag and made haste to mount to the driver's seat. "I've futtred it 'bout's fur's I want ter."

The driver cracked his whip, yelled at the horses, and away they went down the rocky gorge.

"By jinks!" exclaimed the man from Maine, as he pulled the old bell-crown hard down upon his head and planted his feet upon the carpet-bag. "This is a whack better'n futtin' it. How fur'll yeou take me fer a quarter?"

"Cimarron's ther next stop," said Dusty Snif. "I reckon that's whar ye'r boun' fer?"

"I guess so," admitted the Down-Easter, doubtfully. "Yeou see, I'm lookin' fer my fu'st wife's brother, who's in bisness eout heer sumwhere. I've bin trampin' all over this heathen land, an' I hain't heerd a word ov him. But haow much hav' I got ter pay if I ride clean through to this heer village yeou speak ov?"

The driver stated his price, and after some grumbling the man from Maine paid it.

"Seems ter me yeou ax high for everything eout heer," said he, as he extracted a piece of money from the old stocking-foot which served him for a purse. "Guess yeou think folks are made ov munny. Couldn't knock off five cents, could ye?"

Dusty Snif told him that such a thing would be literally impossible. With some reluctance the old fellow parted with the price of the ride.

"Taters didn't turn eout very well this year," declared the Down-Easter, as he restored the peculiar purse to his pocket, "an' aigs hav' been 'tarnal cheap for a long time. My hens didn't lay 'nuff to pay for their keepin', though they dun better'n Josh Bean's did. My hens ginerally do pritty well when aigs are 'way down, an' when aigs are wu't teow cents apiece, the obstinate creeters don't lay for cold swill."

"What did ye say yer name war, pard?" asked the driver.

"Hodge—Peter Hodge. Sum calls me Uncle Peter when I'm ter hum. What's yourn?"

"Joe Snifton, but I'm ginerally known as Dusty Snif."

"That's kind ov queer. I notiss 'bout everybody has nicknames eout heer. Tain't best they go to twistin' round the good ole name my mother give me. Peter was one ov the 'Postles, an' the name suits me, though I don't mind when I'm called Uncle Peter."

"Then Uncle Peter it shell be. W'at's yer fu'st wife's brother's handle? I'raps I know 'im."

"His what?" exclaimed Uncle Peter in amazement.

"His handle—cognomen?"

"Neow don't ye git to pokin' fun at me," warned the Down-Easter, with a grim smile. "I like fun, but it starts me jist a leetle hitch for a clean stranger to tread onto my corns the fu'st thing he duz."

Dusty Snif could not repress a hoarse laugh as he explained that it was the man's name that he inquired for.

"His name?" piped Uncle Peter, looking reproachfully at the driver for a moment, then joining in the laugh. "Then why didn't yeou say so? Yeou folks out heer hav' ther gosh dingdest way ov saying things! Makes me think ov Eph Stubbs's boy Thack. Thack was an idjit, yeou know, an' he'd call an ax a barn jest 's soon's anything. Guess there was 'bout's much sense in that as in callin' a man's name a handle. Hey?"

Then the old man shook from head to foot with laughter, evidently thinking that he had more than got even with Dusty Snif. The driver began to enjoy the Down-Easter's peculiar ways, and was really glad that he had given him a place on the box!

Onward rolled the stage, the driver handling the ribbons with a skill that told of long practice. Uncle Peter watched him with admiring eyes.

"Guess yeou've driv' hossses before," observed the old man. "Yeou handle the webbins's if yeou was used to it."

"Waal, I'd orter be. I've been doin' it fur ther last twenty y'ars. But yer didn't tell me thet feller's name."

"So I didn't. His name's Jinkins—Jonathan Jinkins. Do yeou know him?"

Dusty Snif shook his head.

"I don't seem ter ketch thet name," he admitted; "an' I reckon I know 'most everybody. I don't b'lieve thet's a Jinkins in Cimarron. But p'raps he's dropped thet handle an' tuck ernuther. He didn't hev ter skip fur stealin' hossses or stabbin' a man or suthin' o' thet sort, did he?"

Uncle Peter glared at the driver and scowled in a vain attempt to banish the look of good humor that marked his face.

"Young man," he said, sternly (Dusty Snif

was forty-five if a day), "don't attempt to tample with an ole man's feelin's. I hav' a sorter fam'ly pride that jest won't let me endoor any slur 'ginst my fu'st wife's brother. I'm gittin' kinder ole an' outer kilter, but I'll fight fer my fam'ly."

Skif hastened to assure the old man that no direct offense was intended.

"Yer see," he concluded, "ser menny galoots cum out byer what's dun suthin' as makes 'em liable ter ther law, an' changes their names, that we don't know but one as calls hisself Whiteuster be Black back in ther States."

"Wal, I guess Jonathan Jinkins never done ary thing that he's 'shamed ov. We allus was good friends, though his sister Marthy did leave me arter livin' with me for nigh to four years, an' then got er deevorce."

"Shook ye, did she?"

"No, she didn't!" cried Uncle Peter, sharply. "I never saw the woman yit that could shake me. My boy Job tried that once, an' I jest peeled him rite outer his close. He never cut that caper ag'in."

"I mean that she deserted ye."

"There yeou go ag'in!" exclaimed the man from Maine; "sayin' what yeou don't mean. Why don't yeou talk like common folks? Yes, she got a deevorce, an' I never 'peared ag'in her."

"P'raps her brother won't care ter see ye now," ventured Dusty Snif.

"Yes, he will!" asserted Uncle Peter. "I know Jonathan. He's built out ov the right kind of timber. I've heerd that's he's rich. Hev ye enny rich men in the village where we're goin'?"

"Waal, there are a few," replied the driver.

"Who's got ther most munny?"

"Martel Molina is sed ter be the richest man in Cimarron."

"Haow much yeou s'pose he's wu'th—tew thousan' dollars? Ole Rash Cole, who lived over in Harmony Holler, was wu'th three thousan' clean cash they sed."

"Waal, Martel Molina is probably wu'th more'n a hundred thousan' dollars."

"Git eout!"

Uncle Peter nearly sprung off the seat.

"Look here, young man," he said, half-angrily, "if yeou want ter try an' see who can tell the biggest lie, jest say so."

It was with some difficulty that Dusty Snif convinced the old man that he was in dead earnest. From that time, until they came in sight of Cimarron, he told the man from Maine of the camp and its inhabitants, so that when Uncle Peter descended in front of the Silver Palace, he was pretty well posted concerning his surroundings.

Carrying his old carpet-bag in his right hand, Uncle Peter entered the hotel, unmindful of the glances of amusement bestowed upon him. The old man called for a room, and with some grumbling paid his bills for three days in advance. He was then shown to a room.

Uncle Peter found himself in the usual thin-partitioned, rough-looking room.

"This is comfort," he muttered, grimly, as he dropped the old carpet-bag on the floor, and flung the bell-crowned hat into one corner. Then he lay down upon the bed, and soon fell asleep.

CHAPTER XII.

UNCLE PETER AS A SHADOWER.

WHEN the man from Maine awoke he heard the low hum of voices in the adjoining room.

At first he thought nothing of this, but as he lay there he caught a word now and then, and he soon began to show signs of interest. Without making a sound, he moved nearer the partition.

There were evidently two or more persons in conversation, and they were speaking in guarded tones. There was one whose voice was hoarse and unpleasant; another spoke in a shrill tone that was modulated for the occasion; still another had a smooth, hissing voice. There were three of them surely.

"We must all of us strike for his life!" hissed the smooth voice.

"Durn his hide!" growled the speaker. "I never run ag'in' sech er reg'lar cyclone since I war born ter suffer an' perish in this cold and cruel world. He's wu'ss nor a crazy steam engine."

"But you are not satisfied?" quickly spoke the first. "Surely you are not done with this fighting terror?"

"Not by er blamed sight! Jist take a look at mer beaucharfully frescoed mug, Casper, an' see if his knuckles hev improved Hick'ry Bill's good looks."

"Diabolo! Your two eyes are black, your face is bruised and cut. Surely you have cause to remember this fellow."

Then the listener heard a thump and jingle of glasses, as if a heavy fist had struck a table on which the glasses stood.

"Member him!" growled the hoarse voice; "guess I will! I'll give him reason ter 'member me in ther hot kentry ter which he'll prob'lly go."

"It's er durned long time atween drinks," piped the shrill voice.

"Thet's all ye think of, Posey."

Then followed a clicking of glasses, gurgling sounds and sighs of satisfaction.

"How are you to finish the life of this fighting Americano?" asked the smooth voice.

"Don't ye worry 'bout that, Casper. I'm no match fer nim wi' fists, but I'm goin' ter pick er quarrel wi' him. I sha'n't hesitate 'bout usin' a shooter. I kin bore him an' be outer his reach, an' I'll do et."

"But the people—they may call it—what you say—foul play. That would mean to hang by the crowd. You do not like that?"

"Waal, hardly. But I'm all rite as fer that. Ye all know as how that's one who wants ther cow-puncher salted. He offered me a cool fifty ter do ther job wi' er knife, or er hundred each ef we'd get him lynched. I tried ter stick him jest w'en he shot out ther lights, but I reckon [cut sumbuddy else. Anyhow, that war blood on ther floor an' he warn't cut. Ther galoot w'at got ther knife skinned rite out. Guess he warn't cut bad."

"It must 'a bin that galoot w'at he war torkin' ter," observed the shrill-voiced fellow.

"It may hev bin. Anyhow, that galoot's cl'arin' out as he did guy me a show ter charge ther cow-puncher with murder an' pick a quarrel."

"An' git rid fer er muel."

"Shet up, Posey! Ye'r too free wi' yer serplus jaw. Let ther likker stop yer mouth."

Again the glasses clinked and again came the gurgling sounds.

"The time while you were fighting with the man with the two hard fists we were giving those who looked on the secret touch that the man of money did give us," obseved the smooth voice. "He said that they would do as we commanded if we gave them that. We said for the man we hated to be hanged for murder. When the fight was done, they took him from the room to hang him. He then did escape."

"We all know that, Cas," said the hoarse speaker, with some impatience. "W'at we want ter git at now's how we're goin' ter wind up his worsted ther next chance we git. Ther charge o' murder's too thin. Thar's no evidence ter support it, fer ther boody hain't bin found. We've got ter git at ther cuss some other how."

"You said that you would do that thing. You are not afraid that again he will ride you like the horse?"

Again there was the sound of a heavy fist striking the table.

"No, by ther holy poker, I hain't! I will do this if you an' Pete will finish ther other job of which we war torkin'."

"We'll do that, Bill," declared the shrill voice. "Yer kin count on et."

"You say there is not much danger?"

"None a tall. Ther ole fool will hav' ther safe open till nine. Wile he's usin' it, he never keeps it full locked."

"Then I kin open it in er minit," declared the piping voice. "I've worked 'em afore."

"Hush, comrades!" warned the low voice. "We are speaking much too loud. He said that the room on the right and the one on the left were empty. If we speak too loud we will be heard even beyond."

Uncle Peter grinned.

"Guess he didn't know Uncle Peter Hodge, from Maine, was here," he thought.

The plotters now lowered their voices and the eavesdropper was obliged to place his ear against a crack in order to catch a word. Even in that position he could not hear half that was said. However he discovered that they were planning to rob some one. Who this was or when they were going to attempt the job, Uncle Peter could not learn.

Uncle Peter became very desirous of seeing the plotters' faces. The first crack he tried was too high. He then found one lower down and applied his eye. He could hardly repress a muttered exclamation of disappointment when he discovered that two of the men were sitting with their backs toward him. The face of the third man he could see.

This individual was none other than the bruised ruffian, Hickory Bill.

The companions of the scarred and fallen "chief" were Posey Pete and Casper Gonzalo.

Uncle Peter surveyed Hickory Bill's features closely, and then examined what could be seen of his companions. Never for a moment did he take his eye from the crack, hoping that one or both would turn their faces so that he could see them.

He met with disappointment.

The consultation finally ended, and Posey Pete once more remarked that it was a long time between drinks. Again the glasses clicked, and the vile liquor vanished down capacious throats.

"Now," said Hickory Bill, "we'll stick ter our 'greements. I'll down the critter as calls hisself a Hard Nut ter Crack while you scoop ther boddle. Thar'll be no trubble 'bout workin' ther game at both eends ef we do our level best."

"If you use the pistol and give him not an even show, will not those who witness say that it was murder?" asked Casper Gonzalo.

"I reckon not. Thar's er open row atween

us. Ef I drap him fu'st, who'll say he w'u'dn't 'a' dun ther same thing in my place? 'Sides that I reckon that's one man as has power ernuff in this hyer camp ter say who'll hang an' who won't. Thet man wants Hustler Harry putt out o' ther way."

"Waal, I'd raythur hav' our job 'n yourn," declared Posey Pete.

"Thet's 'cause ye hain't got the backbone, Posey. Ye lack sand."

"Ef I lack sand, I've got er leetle judgment," was the swift reply.

"Waal, we won't scuss that, though yer nose gives ye ther lie," and Hickory Bill chuckled hoarsely.

Once more the plotters drank round, then arose to leave the room.

Uncle Peter breathed an exclamation of disappointment. Not once had Casper or Pete turned their heads, and when they arose their faces were above the line of observation to be obtained through the crack. The plotters left the room without the Yankee being able to catch a glimpse of Pete's and Casper's faces.

The Down-Easter listened and heard them go heavily down the stairs.

"Neow, Uncle Peter, ole boy," laughed the man from Maine, "yeou wanter see'f yeou kin git yer winkers onto them fellers an' shadder 'em."

A few moments later, he emerged very quietly from the room and went lightly down the stairs in the wake of the plotters. First he looked out on the street, but saw nothing of his men. Then he glanced into the bar-room. Hickory Bill was there, talking with the barkeeper.

"One of them," muttered Uncle Pete. "Where's the others?"

The man from Maine sauntered into the bar-room, and drawing forth a blackened old pipe, began to fill it. Hickory Bill glanced at him, but said nothing.

From that time on Uncle Peter did not lose sight of Hickory Bill. When meal time came the man from Maine ate hurriedly, and all the time Bill was standing just outside the dining-room door, talking with a man.

Uncle Peter's peculiar actions attracted attention, and caused more than one to smile, but everything was attributed to his "greeness."

"Never see'd sech a kentry," he grumbled, as he hastily crammed the food into his capacious mouth. "A feller jest can't git ennything to eat. Hain't seen enny baked beans for a dog's age, and I don't more'n haff beleeve I'd know what they was neow if I did see 'em."

Some of the people at the table smiled, some looked disgusted. But unmindful of their mirth or disgust, the queer old fellow continued to crowd the food into his mouth and complain that he could not get anything to eat.

Finally Hickory Bill moved from the door and Uncle Peter arose from the table with both hands filled with food.

"S no use to try," he muttered, as he walked away. "I jest can't eat that theer stuff. By gum! I'd give a quarter for a piece ov pumpkin pie!"

Uncle Peter hoped that Hickory Bill would be joined by his plotting companions, but in this he was disappointed. Twilight followed sunset and darkness settled swiftly over the mountain pocket and camp of Cimarron. Uncle Peter shadowed Hickory Bill to a cheap restaurant and back again to the Silver Palace. The rough seemed to be waiting for some one. The man from Maine thought that he expected to be joined by his companions of the smooth and piping voices; but he was mistaken.

The bully was watching for Hustler Harry.

Hickory Bill believed that the Man from High Notch would not hesitate to return to the Silver Palace when he became thus inclined, and the result proved that the bully was right.

The evening was yet new, although the saloon of the Silver Palace had begun to fill rapidly, when Hustler Harry appeared. He entered the room as if a charge of murder had not been made against him there the night before, and advancing to the bar, quietly called for a cigar.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WORK OF DESPERATE MEN.

MARTEL MOLINA lay groaning on the sofa within his private room. A bandage around his head indicated that he was suffering from a headache. Since noon he had been thus, but had obstinately refused any care or attention from Pearl.

Slowly the hours dragged by.

At dusk Pearl brought him some food and a cup of warm tea.

"Don't you feel better, papa?" she asked, anxiously.

"No," he groaned, shortly.

"Perhaps the tea will help you. I made it strong, for I know that you like strong tea when you have these spells."

Molina was touched.

"You're a good girl," he declared, "and I do not half appreciate you."

She dropped on her knees beside the couch and placed her arms about his neck.

"You're a dear, good papa," she murmured softly, as she kissed him.

He groaned a little as he thought of the scene

which had occurred in that very room the night before. Not that he felt more favorable toward Eric Craddoc, but he regretted his harshness toward Pearl on that occasion. Other measures would have served as well he was fain to believe.

"Don't you want me to bathe your head?" she asked.

"I guess not, pet," he replied, as he drew her nearer. "It will feel better by and by. It is always necessary for these spells to have their run."

She laid her head down upon his breast and was silent for a long time. He lightly stroked her hair, not heeding the food she had brought. At last she started up, saying:

"Now, father, you must eat. See what I have brought you. Surely you can find something here."

He looked at her and smiled, although his head was still throbbing.

"I will drink the tea," he said; "and I may eat a little. You may come again by and by. After I eat, I may try to catch a little sleep. You may come by nine. If I am better then, I will speak with you about a certain matter."

Pearl left the room with an unpleasant feeling in her bosom, despite her father's kind words. That last sentence had revived the memory of that unpleasant interview of the previous evening. Was it that of which he wished to speak?

Within her room she leaned from the open window to catch the cool breeze. As she did so she heard a sound beneath.

"Pearl!"

Her heart leaped as she heard that softly spoken word. She knew the voice ere she saw that dark form beneath the window. Eric was there.

That day she had sent him a brief note, in which she had expressed a desire to see him, but had warned him not to attempt to call on her, as it would be worse than useless. Her father had forbidden her taking her usual ride into the hills, depriving her of meeting him in that manner.

"Eric," she whispered back. "Is that you?"

"Yes," was the reply. "You said you wished to see me."

She had said so, but now she hesitated about meeting him in a clandestine manner. It seemed a wrong thing to do, but even as she hesitated she felt that she would be given no opportunity to meet him differently. She felt sure that her father would do everything that he could to separate and estrange them. She had written Eric that she wished to see him; the opportunity had come; she would not reject it.

"Stay there," she whispered. "I will come down."

Swiftly she threw a dark shawl over her head and shoulders and silently stole down the stairs. Her breath came short and quick and her heart fluttered wildly within her breast. Was it because she was doing something at which, if he knew, her father would be very angry, or was it because she was going to meet him?

She could not tell herself.

Swiftly she ran around the corner of the house straight into a pair of strong arms which caught and held her fast, while a low musical laugh sounded in her ears and a kiss fell upon her forehead.

For an instant she was too surprised to speak or resist. She had hardly looked for such an action on Eric's part. In that one brief moment that she lay with her head against his shoulder he whispered softly:

"My darling!"

Suddenly she started from him. He made an effort to hold her, but finding that she was determined allowed her to step back a pace, where she stood trembling like a leaf.

"Mr. Craddoc," she said, almost hoarsely; but she failed to complete the sentence of rebuke.

"Pearl!"

Again he uttered her name, and this time there was a tale of passionate love in that one word. She heard and understood, although she still trembled and her heart beat within her bosom as a bird newly imprisoned beats against the bars of its gilded cage. He reached out and grasped her hands with both of his and she allowed him to draw her nearer.

"Pearl," he breathed, "forgive me, but I could not help it. You are not angry?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" she uttered, with a little broken laugh. "How dared you?"

"Don't ask me that, for I cannot tell. I never should have dared, I fear, had I not found you so suddenly in my arms. But I'll not retreat now. Instead, I am going forward."

He drew her still nearer. She hung back a little, hardly knowing whether to yield or rebuke him. His eyes were looking down through the dusky gloom, and she caught their earnest glow as she flashed one startled glance upward. A spell seemed to fall upon her, and when she would have drawn away she was unable to do so.

"My darling," he again said in thrilling tones, "I am not going to retreat. I am going to burn the bridges behind me. Pearl, I love you!"

He had said it, and again she was startled, although she did not spring away. For some

reason, she had not expected him to say it so quickly. She had hoped that he would, yet she had not looked for it then.

"Don't be frightened little one," he pleaded.

She attempted to reply, but could not. Her voice failed her, but she summoned strength enough to look upward into his face. That glance told him all.

"You love me!" he murmured. "I see it in your face. Until this moment I have not dared to hope. Pearl, my darling!"

He caught her in his arms and kissed her again and again. Suddenly she started from him, saying bashfully:

"Come away! come away from here! We may be seen, and I would not have any one know now for the world!"

She drew him toward a tree standing near. Beneath its branches was a dense darkness. There they would not be apt to be discovered.

When they had reached the spot, he asked, half-reproachfully:

"Why would you not have any one know for the world? Surely, Pearl, you are not ashamed—"

A soft hand was pressed over his lips, and swiftly, passionately she said:

"Don't say it, Eric! You should know that I would do nothing of which I was ashamed. But I am afraid."

He drew her nearer.

"Of whom? Tell me, Pearl, whom you are afraid of? I will protect you with my life!"

"I am not afraid of personal violence, but if papa only knew he might prevent our meeting again."

"Surely your father cannot look so unfavorably upon me. I can prove to him that I am an honest man. We love each other. Why should he step between us?"

"Eric," she said, frankly, "I will tell you why. He believes that you are an adventurer."

"I can easily convince him of his mistake."

"But there is still another reason. He wishes me to marry Horace Kelnot."

"I feared as much. But surely he will not force you into such a union against your wishes?"

"No, I do not think he will use force, but he will bring forward everything possible to induce me to accede to his wishes."

"But you do not care for that man?"

She shuddered a little.

"I fear him. He fills me with a feeling of dread whenever he comes near me."

"And you love me? Tell me true. I read your love in your eyes, but I long to hear the sweet words from your lips. Say: Eric, I love you."

Softly she murmured the words. Again he pressed her to his breast.

"Nothing shall come between us, darling," he whispered, with strong determination. "I have loved you since the day we first met, though I dared not hope to make you mine. Whatever lays in our path to happiness shall be surmounted."

"I fear you will find it harder than you dream."

"I care not. Knowing that you love me, nothing shall daunt. I have been investigating Horace Kelnot's record, but I can learn nothing of it before he came to Cimarron."

"Oh, Eric, I am sure that he is a wicked man! Something tells me that he is. If you could only convince papa of this—prove it to him."

But Eric was too wise for such a move.

"No, no, little one: that would not do. Even if I could prove to your father that Kelnot is a bad man, it might not put me in a more favorable light. I would never try to build myself up by pulling down another. If he learns anything against Kelnot, I will not be the one to open his eyes. He must learn it through some other agency."

Pearl was silent for several minutes. She saw the wisdom of Eric's words. Finally she said:

"Papa must be shown the kind of a man Horace Kelnot is. Perhaps some accident will reveal the man's true character."

"Such fortunate accidents seldom happen," sighed Eric. "But we will hope for the best, little one."

The lovers talked for a time longer, and then Pearl declared that she must return to the house. Eric made her promise to meet him there again, and then they separated.

Pearl entered the house and cautiously ascended to her room. Within her private chamber she sat down by the window and gazed out into the gloom, which was broken here and there by the lights which shone from the windows of adjacent cabins.

Her thoughts were both joyous and sad. Her heart was full of gladness, for now she knew that Eric truly loved her; she had heard his lips whisper loving words. But she realized that, unless something of an unexpected nature occurred, her father would never consent to her union with Eric Craddoc.

While she sat there in the darkness she fancied that she heard a suppressed cry from below. She started to her feet and listened. Everything seemed silent within the house, but

for some reason she felt that something was wrong.

Her father—perhaps something had happened and he had called to her.

With her heart beating violently in her bosom and her limbs trembling beneath her, she stole swiftly and noiselessly down the stairs. Like a silent shadow she flew to the door of her father's room and laid her hand on the knob. An instant later she was within the room.

"Papa—"

She stopped short, the word frozen on her lips. Two masked men were in the room. Her father was sitting on the sofa, and one of the men held a cocked revolver to his head. Both men glanced toward Pearl as she entered.

For a moment the four persons within the room were as silent as if carved from stone. Then a sharp shriek of surprise and terror burst from Pearl's lips.

Both of the masked men gave utterance to oaths of consternation and dismay.

"The game's dished!" exclaimed the one who held the revolver. "Scoop the gal, pard."

The other sprung forward and caught Pearl in his arms, at the same time hissing:

"Caramba! You spoil the game; we take you, not the money. Your father will pay for you well."

"Right you are, pard," piped the other, as he reversed the heavy revolver and struck Molina on the head with the butt.

The mine-owner was knocked senseless.

As she witnessed this brutal blow, the girl uttered a second shriek and struggled wildly to escape from the strong arms that held her.

"No you cannot," hissed the smooth voice. "If you are not still, senorita, then we shall have to make you so."

But the last sentence was wasted, for Pearl had fainted in his arms.

CHAPTER XIV.

FACE TO FACE.

OBTAINING his cigar, Hustling Harry bit off the end, and as he lighted it, coolly glanced around the room.

The man from Maine was standing within four feet of Hickory Bill when Hustling Harry entered, and Uncle Peter heard the bully mutter:

"Thar's my bird. I thort he'd cum."

The Down-Easter surveyed Hustling Harry critically.

As the Man from High Notch leaned carelessly against the bar for a moment, he felt a touch on his arm. Looking around, he perceived a rather jolly-appearing old fellow at his elbow. The stranger winked with the whole broadside of his face, as he said:

"Why, hello ye, mister! I didn't quite know yeou when I see yeou cum in, but sez I to myself, sez I, I'll bet a punkin I hev met that feller somewhere. So I jest cum over to see 'f I was right or wrong; an' by golding, I was!"

Harry could not repress a smile, as he closely surveyed the man from Maine. At the same time there was a suspicious light in the cowboy's eyes.

"I know it's a mighty onery thing not to recognize an old pard," smiled the Man from High Notch; "but I hope ter lose my holt on King-dum Cum ef I kin place ye."

"I guess yeou mean by that that yeou don't know me?"

"Wal, that's 'bout ther size of it."

"Cum over here."

Hustling Harry fancied that the Yankee was acting a part in pretending to know him, and although he did not hesitate to follow the man from Maine, he was sharply on the alert for any unexpected move.

Uncle Peter moved away to a deserted part of the room, then he turned toward Harry.

"P'raps you may think it funny that I want to speak to ye; but I'll 'spain it. My name's Hodge—Uncle Peter Hodge, an' I b'long in Damascus, Maine. I'm out heer lookin' for my fu'st wife's brother, an', by thutteration! I'm havin' a 'tarnal hard time findin' him. Feller might jest's well hunt for a needle in a hay-mow. 'F I'd known what an all-goshed great big country this was, I'd staid to hum. My fu'st wife's brother's name's Jinkins—Jonathan Jinkins, an' he's—"

"Wal, what's all this ter do with me?" demanded Hustling Harry, with some impatience.

"Neow, hold on a dite," spluttered Uncle Peter, a little confused. "I'm comin' to that. My s'arch took me to this village, an' seein's I was pritty well peetered when I got here, I went to ther leetle pen that these fell's call a room an' took a snooze. When I waked I heerd sum fellers in the next room. They was kinder layin' a plan to fix sumbuddy fit to put inter a coffing. I kept still an' heerd the 'hole plan. An' if I bain't mistook, you are the man they're arter."

Harry was interested now, and with little difficulty he succeeded in learning all that Uncle Peter knew. The man from Maine told his story in his own quaint style, and when he had finished, Hustling Harry thanked him.

"Ef that big calf wants to try me ag'in, let him do so," said the cowboy. "I used him easier afore than I shell next time."

Then the Man from High Notch offered Uncle Peter his hand and they separated.

Hustler Harry was amazed because his advent in the saloon had created no more excitement. He had expected that the crowd would still be thirsting for his blood, and would stand ready to attempt to complete the unfinished work of the night before. He had come prepared to face them and defend himself.

But, although many curious glances were turned toward the Man from High Notch, not a hand was lifted against him. There were many within that room who only waited a certain signal to hurl themselves at Hustler Harry's throat; but that signal was not given.

The silence of his enemies did not render Hustler Harry less keenly on the alert, for he well knew that he might be suddenly attacked. He did not forget that not only was he charged with murder, but some one had declared that he was the chief of the Brothers of the Red Heart, a strange, secret organization.

The gamblers were already fleecing their victims, and one of the faro lay-outs was doing a thriving business. Hustler Harry approached the crowd which was gathered in front of the faro-table, and obtaining a favorable position, watched the game for a short time.

Finally he tried his luck and won five successive bets on the queen of hearts. With a light laugh, he gathered up his winnings and turned away.

He did not go far before he came face to face with a veiled female. She motioned him to stop, and said in a low tone:

"I wish to speak with you, sir."

The cigar came out of Hustler Harry's mouth in an instant, and bowing, he replied:

"I am at your service, madam."

"There are too many to hear us if we remain here," she said. "Over there is an unused table where we can talk without attracting attention."

She pointed toward the table, but seemed-reluctant about leading the way. Harry noticed this, and did not hesitate to advance through the crowd. She followed.

When the table was reached, they sat down at opposite sides. There was a look of wonder on the cowboy's face, and he gazed searchingly and inquiringly at his veiled companion.

Through two holes cut in the heavy veil the woman's eyes glowed like burning stars. For several seconds she gazed at Hustler Harry without speaking. Finally, she said:

"At last we meet, Philip Barret!"

The look of surprise on the cowboy's face grew deeper. It seemed that he had recognized nothing familiar in the woman's appearance or in her low, hoarse voice. Slowly he shook his head:

"Ther hull blamed town's gone plum' daft," he muttered, still staring at the woman. "It's thet, or else I look tollerable like I was sumbuddy else, an' more'n one at thet."

The female made a swift gesture of impatience.

"It is useless for you to deny your identity," she declared. "I know you."

"Jest w'at ther detective sed," and Harry shook his head in a puzzled way. "He called me Jack Tackaloo, or suthin' of thet sort. Sed I was a murderer—"

"And you are!" hissed the veiled woman—"a vile, cowardly murderer! One who struck down an old man—killed him while trying to obtain his hidden wealth!"

The Man from High Notch stared at the excited speaker in blank amazement. He seemed to doubt that he had heard aright.

"Wal, I'll be dashed!"

It did not seem possible that he was feigning surprise, yet his words and manner seemed to arouse the female to perfect fury.

"You cannot deceive me!" she declared, as she leaned toward him and gazed straight into his blue eyes. "You slew my father, Philip Barret, and I will have your life for the dastardly act!"

A revolver gleamed in her hand, but Hustler Harry's self-possession had not entirely deserted him. Swift as thought, he reached across the table, and the falling hammer of the bright weapon found a soft cushion of flesh. A moment later it was wrested from her grasp.

"I beg yer pardon, leddy, but you forced me ter be rude. I'll sw'ar as how I'd never dun it ef I hadn't been 'bleeged ter. It was git ther pop or swaller lead, an' I went fer ther pop. I'll give ye my word thet ef I can't convince ye of yer mistake, you shell hav' ther little gun back, an' I'll give ye a chance ter fill me full of blue pills. W'at more kin ye ax fer?"

There was a look of sincere regret on his honest face and a troubled light in his blue eyes. His voice was soft and low, despite his illiterate words.

The veiled female sunk back in her chair panting and trembling. For some time she could not speak. She seemed utterly exhausted by the excitement of the moment.

"I allus reckoned as how I knew my own handle," added the cowboy. "But last night a feller called me Jack Tackaloo, an' sed I was a red-handed murderer. Ter-night I'm called suthin' else, but I'm still a murderer. These

hyer things hav' set me plum' adrift an' I'm 'bout ready to say as how I don't know who I am my own blessed self. Ef I ever break loose frum ther main herd ag'in, I'll bell myself or be branded so durned deep as that jest can't be no mistake—I jest will now!"

He appeared in dead earnest. The smile which usually marked his face had entirely vanished.

The female looked at him as if she was a trifle puzzled. Could it be that she had made a mistake?

"Do you deny that you are Philip Barret?"

"Don't deny anything," admitted the cowboy. "I did think as how I knew myself, but I guess I don't no more. On ther range I was called Hustling Harry, an' my other name was Hanson; but 'twouldn't s'prise me er bit ef I turned out ter be sumbuddy else."

"You are not a cowboy."

"Jest w'at t'other feller sed!"

"You are Philip Barret, an adventurer, and the chief of a band of robbers."

Hustler Harry caught his breath, as he leaned toward her, saying earnestly:

"You can't mean thet! 'Nuther chap sed I was the chief of the Brothers of the Red Heart. I'm gittin' all tangled up. Ef sum one was ter say thet he knew I was Ole Nick hisself, I w'u'dn't more'n hafe dare ter call him a prevaricator."

"Do you deny that you murdered Andrew Foscolo?" demanded the veiled Girl Avenger.

The question seemed to stir Hustler Harry's blood.

In deep, earnest tones he replied:

"I'm ready ter take a solemn oath I never done it—"

"And lie!" came from beneath the veil.

"As God hears me, it is ther truth!" solemnly declared the Man from High Notch. "Whoever this Andrew Foscolo was, he didn't cum ter death by my han's."

Again was Ruth Foscolo puzzled. Hustler Harry's blue eyes met hers frankly, without a visible sign of guilt in their clear depths. Was it possible that she was deceived by a wonderful resemblance? No, it could not be. Those were Philip Barret's eyes, his face, his voice. Barret had appeared like a polished gentleman. Hustler Harry pretended to be a cowboy, but Ruth fancied that at times he did not act his part perfectly. He did not always catch the true dialect of the plains when he spoke.

"A person who would do such a dastardly deed would not hesitate to perjure his soul by a false oath," she exclaimed. "I cannot take your word, for I am convinced that you are my fath'r's murderer!"

She ceased to speak as her eyes fell upon Harry's left wrist. A low cry burst from her lips.

"There is proof!" she cried, as she pointed toward the heart-shaped birthmark. "That mark was on the wrist of Philip Barret, and I saw it at the very moment he struck my poor fath'r senseless at my feet!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE STORY OF A TRAGEDY.

HUSTLER HARRY seemed stricken with amazement. His face had turned white even through the coat of bronze caused by exposure to all kinds of weather. For a moment he appeared too startled to speak.

The veiled girl leaned toward him, her bosom heaving like a storm-swept lake. He heard her short, panting breathing, and saw the unnatural glow of her dark eyes. At that moment Hustler Harry was like one fascinated and spell-bound, and had the Girl Avenger struck at his life, he would not have raised a hand to protect himself.

Ruth Foscolo had sworn beside her murdered parent to avenge his death, even though at that moment she felt sure that when she struck at the heart of the murderer, she would be taking the life of the only man she had ever loved, except her father.

She had learned to love him. He had told her that she was dearer than life to him. Times unnumbered had she listened to loving words from his lips. And he—black-hearted wretch!—had proved to be a snake in the grass.

Hustler Harry's heart beat with strange emotions as he gazed into those dark eyes, now glowing with a deadly determination. Often had he seen in their liquid depths a look of soulful love, in strange contrast with the vengeful light to be seen there now. Her voice, too, seemed changed. Was this Ruth, the gentle creature of the past? He asked himself the question, and longed to tear away that baffling veil that he might look upon her features. But he restrained the impulse, and when he spoke, his voice was filled with what seemed to be unassumed amazement.

"Thet thar mark? Shadder of sin! W'at kind of a fix won't thet git me inter next? Feller sed larst night as how it proved I was Jack Tackaloo. Now it proves I'm sum other galoot what's wussen Tackaloo! I'm gittin' tangled more'n more. I don't jest know who I am, an' ef I turn out ter be the one or ther t'other, I'm er mighty low animile."

The girl made a gesture of impatience.

"Why continue this farce?" she demanded.

"By pretending to be a cowboy, instead of coming out in your true character, you are but proving yourself a pitiable coward as well as a murderer. Nothing can disguise you from my eyes."

The Man from High Notch gazed at her in silence for several moments. He appeared to be revolving in his mind the words he would use when he spoke. After a time he leaned toward her again, saying deliberately in a low tone:

"I wish I c'u'd convince ye that I speak ther truth w'en I sw'ar that thar's sum mistake 'bout this hyer bizness. Sumw'are in ther woodpile thar's er galoot hid w'at looks like me. He's ther varmint w'at's kicked up all this dust. He's ther wild steer w'at's cut up ther devil-begggin' pardon fer ther word—an' now he's layin' low w'ile ther hull deal's saddled off onter me. That's jest ther long an' short of it. But I'll tell ye now that I'm goin' ter pull ther critter out o' his hoel an' ring him in at ther final round-up. I'll prove to yer sackersfaction that I had no han' in this hyer dirty work w'at I'm 'cused of."

"When you wipe that crimson heart from your wrist you may convince me that you are not the murderer of my poor fath'r. Not till then. All your talk is useless. You but make me hate and despise you the more."

It seemed that her words cut Hustler Harry a trifle. He shrank back a little, and his face looked set and drawn. She noticed this, and an exclamation of satisfaction came from beneath the veil.

"You show your guilt! Your face betrays you! Hard and strong though your black heart is, you cannot think of that terrible deed without quailing."

"You mistake my feelin's," was Harry's quiet assertion. "I hain't built of iron or ice, an' w'en I heer er feemale a-callin' of me sech hard things, I jest naturally feel kinder quare round ther stummic. But I'd like fer ter ax ye 'bout this hyer murder w'at I'm 'cused of. Tell me 'bout it, an' by ther power of John Dean! I'll do w'at I kin to help ye hunt ther dirty murderer down. I mean it; an' w'en Hustler Harry gits onter er critter's trail, it might jest ez well pull up an' not try fer to 'skape ther rope. If you'll give me ther points, I'll 'gree ter jine ye in ther hunt fer this galoot w'at ye'r arter."

A low laugh of derisive scorn came from the girl's lips.

"You still hope to pull the wool over my eyes in that way," she said, with infinite contempt. "The trick is too shallow. You know the story as well as I. You came to the door of a poor old hermit—a man who lived alone with his daughter and his faithful old negro servant. You were sick of a fever. The old man took you in, and the daughter nursed you through a long illness. How did you repay them for their kindness? When health and strength came back you had won the girl's heart and made her promise to marry you. But you were false, false!"

She paused a moment, panting and pressing her hands to her bosom. The memory of those days filled her with a nameless feeling of mingled joy and pain. She saw that his eyes were fastened upon her, and with a sudden effort she flung off the feeling of weakness that had so nearly overcome her.

Rapidly and brokenly she continued:

"One day you rode away from the cottage door. In some way you had learned that Andrew Foscolo was the possessor of a large amount of gold, which was hidden somewhere around the cabin. When you returned, a band of masked men were with you. You wore a mask over your own face, but nothing could conceal your identity from the eyes of the girl whom you had taught to love you. She called you by name and you became enraged. The servant was bound, and you sought by threats to cause Andrew Foscolo to reveal the spot where his wealth was hidden. You failed. He recognized you, and sprung to tear the mask from your face. You struck him on the temple with a heavy revolver, and an hour later he breathed his last in my arms. At the very moment you struck that dastardly blow, I saw the crimson heart on your arm!"

She paused an instant, her blazing eyes gazing fairly into his blue orbs. He seemed fascinated by her tale, for he did not stir save to motion her to proceed.

"Have you not heard enough?" asked Ruth, scornfully. "Do you delight to hear the story of your own baseness?"

He did not reply and she continued:

"When you found that my poor fath'r was unconscious, you ordered your brutal followers to whip the old negro servant until he told where the gold was hidden. Black Joe could not tell, for he did not know. So he was beaten until he became unconscious. Finally, in baffled fury, you rode away, first setting fire to the buildings. I alone dragged my senseless fath'r and the half-murdered negro from the burning house. While the red flames devoured our home my fath'r breathed his last in my arms."

Again she paused a moment as if overcome by the memory. Hustler Harry's eyes were fastened upon her and his teeth were hard set. He dared not venture to speak just then.

"Beside my dead father," added the girl, "I swore an oath of vengeance. That oath I will keep. Your heart's blood shall atone for your dastardly work, Philip Barret!"

Her words were low and intense, filled with the spirit of a terrible determination.

Hustler Harry straightened up.

"Now listen to me," he said, earnestly. "I swear by all I hold sacred that I had no han' in the dirty work of which you've jest tolle me. I swear—"

She interrupted him with a cry.

"Stop!" she exclaimed in a tone that drew scores of eyes upon them. "Don't stain your soul still blacker by falsehood. You are the murderer of my father, and I am here to avenge him."

Her eyes blazed with an insane light. A slender dagger gleamed in her hand, and leaping to her feet she bent over the table to strike straight at Hustler Harry's throat.

As her hand came up with that deadly weapon clinched fast by her slender fingers, her wrist was suddenly caught from behind and a smooth, good-natured voice exclaimed:

"Wal, I yum to goodness! That's a dangerous plaything for a child. You might cut sum-buddy with the tarnal instrument ov laseration."

Uncle Peter was on hand.

Ruth uttered a cry that seemed to come from the very depths of her heart, and dropping the knife, sunk back in the chair, looking helpless and shaken.

Hustler Harry gave utterance to a strange exclamation as he leaped to his feet, and catching Uncle Peter by one arm, whirled him aside.

"Thanks fer yer trubble, ole man," he said; "but yer aid wassent needed. I reckon Hustler Harry kin take keer of hisself."

With some anxiety, he bent over the vailed girl only to find himself looking into the eyes of an aged darky who had suddenly appeared on the opposite side of her.

"G'way dar!" cried the excited voice of Black Joe—"g'way dar, critter! Yo' killed ole Massa Foscolo, but yo' des don't tetch her. Help! help!"

The trembling darky fancied that Harry was on the point of murdering the vailed girl, who at that moment had nearly swooned.

The excitement of these events caused the crowd to rush toward the spot. In a moment they were surrounded by a mob, burning with curiosity.

"W'at's ther row?"

"Did she knife him?"

"Who's hurt?"

"Whar's the corpus?"

These and a score of similar questions were asked. And all the time Black Joe kept crying:

"Don' yo' tetch her, I tolle ye! De han' ob jedgment'll struck yo' dead if yo' does! De dressed Lawd hain't gwine ter stan' dis for-eber, don' yo' fink He am, critter. Keep yo' red han's offen dat chile!"

In this emergency Uncle Peter showed his ability to make himself useful. From secret pockets he suddenly produced a pair of revolvers and at once faced the crowd.

"Hole on!" he cried, in a sharp yet commanding tone. "Don't all yeou critters crowd up heer. There hain't nobody hurt, but the lady must hav' air. Git back there, or by golding! yeou'll think yeou've run ag'in' a thrashin'-mesheene. These ar popguns ov mine may 'plode suddin. Git back, I say!"

Muttering sullenly, they were forced back before the muzzles of his weapons, and slowly Uncle Peter made the ring larger.

"No need to crowd the lady so she can't ketch a breath," declared the man from Maine. "I guess she's kerflummuxed or sunthin' ov that sort."

As soon as Ruth perceived the faithful negro at her side, she managed to gasp:

"Take me out of this place! I must get out into the open air!"

But at first she was not strong enough to walk. She longed to lift the vail that she might catch a freer breath, but did not wish to expose her face then.

After a time she arose, and leaning on Black Joe's arm, made her way to the door. The crowd parted respectfully to allow them to pass.

Not once since Uncle Peter foiled her stroke at the throat of Hustler Harry had she glanced toward the Man from High Notch.

Harry watched her retreating form until it vanished through the door. Then he heard a hoarse voice say:

"Ther dirty dog insulted her, I'll bet a muel."

Swiftly he turned and ran his eyes over the crowd. Uncle Pete was at his side, and in a low tone the Yankee declared:

"Neow yeou'll hav' it. Thet big feller'll commence ther fun while he's got er chance. Give 'im gowdy!"

Hustler Harry did not appear to notice Uncle Peter's words, although he heard them quite plainly, and knew that the man from Maine was right. Hickory Bill would not let this opportunity slip to pick a quarrel.

"Whar's ther flannel-jawed whelp as sed thett?" demanded Harry.

Instantly the crowd parted, and Hickory Bill strode forward.

CHAPTER XVI.

PLEDGED PARDS.

"RECKON I'm ther eel w'ot ye'r' bobbin' fer," observed the bully, with a leer.

Hustler Harry gazed at him disdainfully, a smile of amusement on his handsome face.

The Chief of Cimarron looked decidedly "the worse for wear." His face was cut and bruised, and one eye was encircled by a reddish-blue ring. Hustler Harry's hard fists had left their marks.

"Hello!" exclaimed the cowboy. "Is that you, William? I'll allow that I didn't edzactly know ye."

The ruffian uttered an angry growl.

"Ye'll know me better afore shortly," he asserted. "W'ot fer war ye insultin' that leddy?"

"Thet's er leetle thin, William," smiled the Man from High Notch. "Ef ye want to kick up a skirmish, try sum other lay."

Hickory Bill scowled and advanced a step toward the cool cowboy.

"I don't want no row wi' ye—"

Harry laughed.

"Wal, thar!" he exclaimed. "I had begun to think as how ye was er reg'lar hog as didn't know w'en he'd got ernuff, but now it looks like I was mistook. Ef so be I am, then I ax yer parding, William."

The bully was puzzled. He knew not just what to say. It had been his object to create trouble with Harry, and at once settle the cowboy with a lead pill. He had hoped to do this in so prompt a manner that both Harry and the crowd would be taken by surprise. He would then take his chances of satisfying the crowd that it was a fair deal.

But the Man from High Notch had met him in a manner that completely frustrated his plans. It seemed that Harry was looking for him to draw a revolver, and just then Hickory Bill dared not make a motion toward a weapon. He resolved to force the affair and seize the first opportunity.

"No," he said, gruffly. "I don't want no row wi' ye, but ye did insult that leddy. Ther camp o' Cimarron don't allow no outsiders ter cum in hyer an' mistreat its wimmin."

"So ye'r' speakin' fer ther camp, are ye, William?" smiled the Hard Nut. "Wal, I must say that Cimarron has er mighty poor representative."

"Thet's an insult ter me!" snarled Bill.

"Wal, you orter stan' it ef ther camp kin survive arter ye call yerself its representative. Most any other burgh would consider that suthin' ter be wiped out wi' yer blood. Bill, you're a poor tool!"

Hustler Harry was becoming aggressive.

"Durn your skin!" roared the bully. "P'raps you wanter try me ag'in. I war drunk last nite, but I kin settle yer hash ter-nite."

He was rapidly losing judgment. With clinched fists he advanced toward the cowboy sport.

Suddenly Hustler Harry's face became grave.

"Hold on, Bill," he said, as he put up one hand warningly. "Don't force me to pulverize ye ag'in. I warn ye now that I sha'n't leave ye in no shape atall ef ye force me to fight. I don't want to tetch ye ag'in. I'm a peaceable old Maverick w'en I'm let alone, but git me into the rampage an' I'm wussen wild bosses with burrs under their tails. You was drunk er leetle last night, Bill, an' so wasn't quite 'sponsible fer w'at ye did."

His words only enraged Hickory Bill the more.

"An' ye tuck me w'en I war drunk, durn ye! But ye've got ter pay fer it now."

With a yell he leaped toward the cowboy. Hustler Harry stood like a rock, parrying the bully's blow and shooting his own fist out straight from the shoulder.

The blow caught Hickory Bill between the eyes and that worthy went down, striking the floor with a terrible thump.

"Thutteration!" shouted Uncle Peter, fairly dancing with delight. "Warn't that eer jest a slick 'un!"

The crowd uttered a murmur of admiration for the man who would not turn out for the terror, Hickory Bill.

The bully had an unusually hard head, and the blow which he received only served to bring him to his senses. He realized that he had made a fool of himself by attempting to again fight the Man from High Notch on an even footing. But it was too late to retrieve the blunder. Swiftly he jerked forth a revolver.

"Look out, mister!" squeaked the man from Maine. "He's goin' ter shoot!"

But Hustler Harry did not need this warning. He was keenly on the alert for any treacherous move on the part of his foe, and had seen Bill draw the revolver.

Swiftly he leaped forward, and ere the bully could use the weapon, it was sent spinning over the heads of the excited spectators, propelled by the toe of Harry's boot. A deft kick had disarmed Hickory Bill.

The next instant the Man from High Notch forced the chief down upon his back and stood with one foot planted on his breast holding him there.

"Woof!" he exclaimed, with a musical laugh. "I'm Hustler Harry, ther Hard Nut to Crack! Ye don't want ter try any little tack-hammers on my hide. Bring out yer big sledges, an' git yer lives insured w'en ye tackle ther job."

In cold type the words seem very much like the bluster of a braggart, but those who heard them felt that the cowboy sport was all he claimed to be. Harry spoke in a cool, even tone that was pleasant to the ear. There seemed to be nothing effusive in the words as they came from his lips; but uttered by another, half-a-dozen of the crowd might have considered them a challenge.

"Wal, I swan to man!" exclaimed Uncle Peter, as he witnessed Harry's little trick. "That's jest what I call clean science, by gold-ing!"

At this moment Hustler Harry felt a touch on his arm, and a familiar voice said in his ear:

"I wish to speak with you, sir, at once. Every moment lost is disastrous."

He turned to see Eric Craddoc at his elbow. In a moment he remembered the young man whom he had seen in front of the saloon the previous night. Eric's face was very white and he appeared terribly excited. A thought flashed through Harry's mind:

"The girl—she is in trouble. He has come to me because I aided him last night."

"Lead on; I'll foller," he said aloud.

Without paying any further attention to Hickory Bill, the Man from High Notch turned and accompanied Eric toward the door.

With a treacherous glare in his eyes, the discomfited chief sprung up, producing a second revolver, his gaze fastened on Harry's back. But before he could use the weapon, he heard a sharp voice say:

"None ov that, you sneakin' snake! If you try it I'll rize ther holl top ov yer head—I will, by gum!"

Hickory Bill glared around to see a leveled revolver within three feet of his head and just beyond it the grinning face of Uncle Peter Hodge.

Hustler Harry passed out unmolested.

As soon as they were out of the saloon, Eric said:

"I need your aid. Like you, I am comparatively a stranger in this camp. I have been here a little longer than you, but I have made very few friends. Chance threw us together last night when you baffled the fellow who was carrying Miss Molina away—kidnapping her. I got a glimpse of the kind of stuff you are made of then, and am satisfied that you are the very man I need in the emergency that has since arisen."

Harry saw that the young man was greatly excited, and rig'ly surmised that something of an important nature had occurred. In a moment he hit upon the very thing.

"Ther gal—"

"The villains have completed their broken work of last night I fear," groaned Eric.

"She has been kidnapped!"

"I am sure she has."

"Ye kin tell me of it as we go 'long," said Harry.

Hurriedly Eric told his companion of his meeting with Pearl at dusk.

"I did not feel easy after I left her," he continued. "It seemed as if trouble of some kind was menacing her. I could not rest easy, and finally I returned to the house. For a time I stood beneath her window and called her name, but received no answer. I finally concluded that she might be in her father's private-room, where he keeps his valuable papers and attends to a certain part of his business. Passing round the house, I reached the window of his room. The curtain was drawn, but there was a small hole near the bottom through which I peered. I saw Martel Molina lying on the sofa, and at first thought he was asleep. Pretty soon he uttered a groan. Then I noticed that there were two overturned chairs in the room. I began to think that something unusual had happened, although I did not dream the truth. Molina began to groan more and more, and finally in desperation I resolved to enter if I could. To my amazement, I found the door unfastened. When I reached Molina's room he was just trying to sit up. At the sight of me, he gave a shriek and sunk back calling for the villains to bring Pearl back. With a terrible dread seizing on my heart, I searched the house but found nothing of her. I then attempted to question Mr. Molina, but he is deranged and appeared to think me one of the kidnappers. I could learn nothing save enough to confirm my fears."

"You hain't giv' ther 'larm?"

"No. I sought for a friend on whose good judgment I could depend. You were the only one I could think of, strangely enough, and fortunately I found you."

They soon reached Molina's house, and a few seconds later were in the mine-owner's private room. Martel Molina was lying on the sofa, groaning and calling for Pearl. Hustler Harry touched him on the shoulder.

"W'at's ther trubble?" he demanded.

Molina started up.

"They've carried her away—my darling."

Pearl! They came here to rob me—two men—masks over their faces. She came—they took her away! May God's curse follow them! My daughter—my beautiful Pearl!"

"When was this dun?"

"Oh, I don't know! Pearl! Pearl! Pearl! Come back! come back! Oh, sir; you will bring her back? My dear girl! They carried her away—those devils in masks! Ah!"

He paused as he saw Eric standing near. Reaching out, he caught Harry by the arm and drew him nearer.

"There," he sibilated, hoarsely, "he was one of them! He pretends to love her—my Pearl! He is a wolf! He was one of them who carried her away!"

Harry turned toward Eric.

"He's ravin' mad," said the cowboy, soberly. "Ther varmint hav' turned his head as well as stole his darter."

"She is gone," came hoarsely from Eric's lips; "but I will rescue her from the bands of the villainous kidnappers. If I live I swear to restore her to her father's arms."

"An' I'm with ye, my lad!" exclaimed the Man from High Notch, heartily. "I'll stan' by ye through thick an' thin, as sart'in as my handle's Hustler Harry, the Hard Nut ter Crack. Hyer's my han' on et."

Then their hands met in a firm grip.

CHAPTER XVII.

HARRY TO THE RESCUE.

Away through the darkness into the hills the kidnappers bore their unconscious victim. They had succeeded in getting beyond the bounds of Cimarron City without being stopped, although they had barely escaped detection.

Beyond the limits of the camp they had removed the masks from their faces, and daylight would have shown them to be Posey Pete, the bummer, and his more crafty and desperate companion, Casper the Spaniard.

"Ah-ha!" laughed Casper, as they galloped away through the night. "We were foiled at one turn, but the senorita is a treasure not to be despised. For her Senor Molina will pay very much. This night's work should make us rich, comrade."

Posey Pete uttered a growl.

"I'd rayther got mer fingers onto ther ole shark's ducats," he admitted.

"Those will follow, comrade; those will follow," declared the Spaniard, reassuringly. "The senor will pay well for the safe return of his daughter."

"I'm as thinkin' he'll pay well fer ther captor o' ther galoots w'at tuck her away. Thet's w'at trubbles me!"

"Ah, comrade, I fear you are not a brave man. But trust to me. This is not the most desperate game in which I have taken part."

"I know ye'r' a hummer, Cas," acknowledged the bummer; "but ther best o' us are apt ter git inter a snarl sumtimes. Ole Molina's got ther rocks ter hire a small army ter hunt us down."

"If he does that, we will threaten. We will say that senorita's life shall pay if we are hunted. That will cause him to have a care."

"I reckon yer right, but fer sum reason I feel that this hyer 'fair's goin' ter git us inter a 'tarnal snarl."

"You need liquor to strengthen your courage," laughed Casper.

"By smoke, ye'r' right!" exclaimed Pete, quickly. "Hain't ye got a drap, ole man?"

But Casper was too wise to give the bummer liquor just then.

"I have none," he replied.

Casper was the owner of the horses on which they were mounted. The Spaniard told the truth when he declared that he had engaged in games that were more desperate than the one they had just begun to play. In fact, he was a thoroughly desperate and reckless man.

It was a long ride away into the hills. Pearl, whom the untiring Spaniard held in his arms, regained consciousness a short time before they halted.

They finally reached the point for which they were aiming.

"Here we stop," said Casper. "There is a cave."

They dismounted, and while Pete was attending to the horses, the Spaniard bore Pearl into a cave, the mouth of which was concealed by some bushes. Casper appeared to know the surroundings, for he advanced through the dense darkness without hesitation.

"Here we are, senorita," he finally said, as he placed her on her feet in the darkness.

Pearl had not regained her strength, and at once sunk to the floor. Casper struck a light and soon found a partly-burned candle standing on a narrow, rocky shelf. Evidently the cave had been used before.

With the candle in his hand, Casper assisted Pearl to arise.

"You shall not be harmed, senorita," declared the Spaniard, with attempted gallantry. "You need have no fear."

Pearl did not reply. A feeling of terror and despair locked her lips. She allowed Casper to lead her still further into the cave.

They finally came to a deep niche within the

wall. At the further extremity was a mass of dead boughs, which had evidently been used as a couch. Pearl flung herself down there and burst into tears.

After vainly attempting to pacify her, Casper set about gathering some brands, and soon started a small fire, the smoke of which passed upward through some unseen outlet. The light of the fire dispelled the shadows and made the place appear less gloomy.

Posey Pete soon appeared, and he and Casper engaged in a long consultation. Carefully they planned their future movements, and Casper repeatedly cautioned the bummer not to drink.

"If you do so," declared the Spaniard, impressively, "you will be sure to talk and tell things which you should not. If we are captured by the men of Cimarron it will mean to hang. Guard well your tongue."

His words were not wasted on Pete.

"I reckon ye'r' right," admitted the bummer, soberly. "I hain't bankerin' fer ter git my neck stretched yit awhile, an' I reckon they'd count gal-stealin' ekil ter hoss-stealin'."

"Then have a care," warned Casper. "When the chance comes, bring our comrade to this spot. We will then arrange a message which shall be sent to Senor Molina."

The Spaniard accompanied Pete to the mouth of the cave, where they separated. The bummer rode one of the horses back to camp. The other was concealed in the midst of a dense mass of bushes.

When Pete was gone, Casper returned to the cave. He found the captive still lying face downward on the boughs. She lifted a tear-stained face as he entered the circle of light made by the small fire.

"Oh, sir!" she cried; "why was I brought to this place?"

Casper smiled. She was beginning to throw off her weakness. He liked that.

"Now, senorita," he said, in a smooth, oily tone, as he advanced, "do not unnecessarily alarm yourself. I have assured you that you shall not be harmed, and I always keep my word."

"But you have not answered. Why was I brought here?"

"The principal reason is because you happened to come upon my comrade and myself at an unlucky moment—for you."

"I came upon you just as you were robbing my father, you villain!" retorted Pearl, with sudden spirit.

"And spoiled our little game," smiled Casper. "We were forced to leave Senor Molina's wealth untouched just then, but we brought you away with us, hoping that the wealthy Americano would see fit to pay a ransom price for you."

"Another method of robbery," sneered the girl.

"As you like it," bowed the Spaniard.

"You will pay dearly for this. My father will put many men on your tracks, and you will surely be captured."

"I fear that little."

Pearl ceased to talk with her captor, and finally fell asleep and dreamed of her father and Eric. The little fire made the place quite comfortable, and she slept for hours.

Casper sat nodding near the fire, catching brief bits of sleep, but never losing himself for more than two or three minutes at a time. He kept the fire burning steadily.

Slowly the night dragged away, and finally morning came. No light penetrated within the little cave, and still Pearl slept on and Casper nodded by the fire.

Finally the Spaniard fully awoke and made his way to the open air. He found the horse appearing quite contented.

"He is all right until they return," he said, meaning Pete and Bill. "They should be here soon with food, if nothing has happened."

When he returned to the cave, he found that Pearl was fully awake.

"Ah-ha!" he muttered. "Wide awake and looking decidedly better for the sleep."

She gazed at him scornfully, but did not speak.

"Be cheerful, senorita," he cried. "My comrades will soon bring food, and we shall learn how things are in Cimarron. I am sure that you will not have to endure captivity long."

Within her heart Pearl hoped not, but she said nothing.

The hours wore slowly away, and still Posey Pete and Hickory Bill did not appear. After a time Casper began to grow restless.

Noon came, but still the expected ones from Cimarron City did not show up. Both Pearl and Casper were hungry, and the latter tried to comfort the girl by telling her that it could not be long before food would be brought them.

Little did the Spaniard dream that a foe had found that very cave and was within it, creeping stealthily toward him even as he spoke to Pearl.

Suddenly a dark form leaped out of the shadows and alighted on Casper's back. Although taken by surprise, the Spaniard fought fiercely, but the new-comer handled him as if he were a child.

"Kerwoof!" cried the stranger, with a melodic laugh. "Lay still, ye kickin' critter! Don't ye know ye can't git away frum me? I'm Hustler Harry, ther Hard Nut to Crack!"

It was, indeed, the strange cowboy.

In a short time the Man from High Notch had disarmed and bound the Spaniard.

"Thar!" he exclaimed, as he gazed with satisfaction on the helpless man. "I reckon ye will lay thar fer er while, ye dirty gal-stealin' Greaser!"

Pearl sprung up and ran to Harry's side.

"You have come to save me!" she cried, joyfully. "I am sure you have!"

"Wal, I reckun that's 'bout ther size of it," admitted the cowboy, as he gazed admiringly on her tear-stained face, revealed by the flaring firelight.

A string of Spanish oaths came from the lips of the discomfited kidnapper.

"You shall pay for this with your life!" he frothed, as he glared at Hustler Harry. "I will cut your heart out!"

"I reckon not jest at present," laughed the Man from High Notch. "Them thar strings will be apt ter hold ye till yer pards cum' an' release ye. Arter that I shell hav' my weather eye open fer ye, an' if ye try ter stick a knife in my back I'll railroad ye ter Kingdom Cum' in two shakes."

Casper seemed a trifle awed, though he continued to swear savagely.

"Did you come to my rescue alone?" asked Pearl, as she gazed into the darkness.

Harry knew of whom she thought, and smiled.

"I didn't start out alone," he said. "Eric left Cimarron with me, but we split ter s'arch fer you, 'greenin' ter meet at a speshul place."

The girl's face lit up with a look of delight.

"Eric!" she cried, joyously. "Take me to him."

"Come on," he smiled.

He picked up a blazing brand from the fire, and giving Pearl his arm, they started to leave the cave, paying no heed to Casper, who was still swearing and threatening.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PEARL AND RUTH.

WITH a feeling of joy and thankfulness, Pearl allowed the gallant cowboy to guide her from the cave. Eric, her lover, was near. She would soon meet him. The thought filled her with happiness.

They reached the open air and Harry threw aside the brand that he had taken from the fire.

"Reckon ther han' of Providence led me ter find ther gal-stealer's horse," observed the Man from High Notch, soberly. "We've bin mighty forchernate in our hunt fur ye, leetle one. Ther dirty whelps w'at stole ye frum yer home was spotted cummin' this way. Thet guv us ther direction; Fate must hav' dun ther rest."

"And I owe you a deep debt of gratitude for saving me single-handed and alone from that terrible man."

"Ho! Thet's northin'," declared Harry. "Thet Greaser wasn't a flea-bite. I've handled men as c'u'd kill him with both han's tied abind their backs."

"Eric—you say he is near?"

"Wal, he hain't fur orf. We was tergether nor more'n a n'our ago. He's s'archin' fer ye sum'w'ares. I tell ye, leetle one, I've kinder cottoned to that thar chap. He's all wool an' a yard wide. You hear me!"

Pearl murmured a low response, and the irrepressible cowboy continued:

"Tain't often w'at I freeze ter strangers in this hyer way, an' w'en I do I never make a mistake. Eric Craddoc are white. He tells me that he's dead head an' heels in love with er leetle gal 'bout your size, but that her dad don't look on him with favorable optics."

The girl blushed, but said nothing.

"I tolle him as how sech was often ther case, an' not ter git 'scouraged, fer it w'u'd all cum out in ther wash. He sed yer dad had his eye on a feller named Kelnot, what owns ther Silver Palace. I've bin tryin' ter git my eye onto this hyer Kelnot, but blamed ef I kin. He's shy's a wild steer w'en I'm round. Jes' ther same, I'm reddy ter bet he's er rascal. Why I am, I can't tell no more'n I know why I cotton ter Eric: but it's got inter my head, an' I can't shake it."

Pearl looked up at him eagerly.

"Oh, if you could only convince father that he is a wicked man!" she cried. "I would do anything for you!"

"Not marry me, I reckon?" laughed the cowboy. "Oh, no; sumbuddy else w'u'd object ter that. But I'll do it ef I kin, an' let ye name yer reward. A kiss frum ther bride, or a chance ter dance at ther weddin' 'll satisfy me."

Pearl could not help joining in his laugh, which seemed contagious. But with sudden anxiety, she asked:

"But father—how is he? One of those cruel men struck him senseless before my eyes."

Hustler Harry's laugh ceased abruptly.

"I don't think ye need ter be 'larmed 'bout him," said the cowboy. "Ther blow was a

socker, an' shook his head a leetle, but I reckon he'll be all rite w'en we git back."

Pearl questioned him closely, and he told her what he knew, disguising in a measure the fact that Martel Molina had been seriously injured by that foul blow.

As they talked they moved along, Harry acting as guide. Pearl told him of her adventures, and thanked him again and again for what he had done for her.

After a time they reached a secluded spot, where two horses were hitched amid some bushes. Harry uttered an exclamation of disappointment.

"Eric hain't hyer," he said. "He hain't kem back ter this place."

Pearl was disappointed, although she concealed it in a measure.

After a few moments of deliberation, Harry said:

"Here is a place whar ye kin sit down in these hyer bushes, an' ye won't be diskivered ef sum galoot sh'u'd come prowlin' roun'. I'm goin' ter look up ther lad, ef so be he hain't too fur away."

Although she did not like to be left alone, Pearl did not object, for she thought that it would only bring Eric to her side quicker.

With a parting word of cheer, Harry left her. She heard his light footsteps die out in the distance and knew that she was alone save for the companionship of the two horses, which she could hear pawing and browsing close by. She did not feel as lonely as she would had not the animals been near.

"Eric is near," she murmured. "He will come to me soon."

The thought filled her with joy, and for a long time she sat thinking of her gallant lover.

She had fallen into a dreamy state of semi-unconsciousness when the sound of a soft footstep close at hand startled her. In an instant her heart leaped wildly and she pressed her hands to her bosom, listening intently.

Again she heard that light step.

Some one was moving stealthily close by.

She suppressed a strong desire to cry for help, and remained silent, though it seemed that the beating of her heart must be heard by the person or animal, whichever it was.

The step sounded just beyond a thin screen of bushes, and then Pearl saw the bushes slowly parted.

She was spellbound with horror.

Had her late captor succeeded in getting free and tracked her there? The thought was terrifying in the extreme.

Slowly the bushes were parted by small white hands, and a pale face appeared, while two large dark eyes looked in upon her.

Pearl's feeling of terror changed to one of wonder, for she saw that it was the face of a young woman or girl. It was a pale, sorrowful face, yet marked by a look of strong determination.

It was Ruth Foscolo, the Girl Avenger.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "I have found you. I saw you come here with him—that demon!"

Pearl was amazed.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What do you mean?"

The bushes separated, and Ruth stepped into the little glade. Pearl uttered a little cry of alarm, and shrunk away.

"Do not be alarmed," implored the Girl Avenger. "I would not harm you for the world. Indeed, I am here to save you from the hands of that dreadful creature."

"Whom do you mean? Not the gentleman who rescued me surely?"

"I mean the one with whom you came to this spot. Do you know him? You do not, I am sure. Then let me warn you. He is a desperado! A villain of the deepest dye—a murderer!"

Pearl uttered a cry of amazement and horror.

"Oh, you cannot mean that!" she exclaimed. "He appeared like a brave man. Surely you must be mistaken!"

"I wish I were. No! no! I know that scoundrel too well. Listen to me. That man killed my father—murdered him! I saw him do it! Saw him strike my father senseless at my feet!"

Pearl gazed at the strange girl in fascination.

Ruth seemed to comprehend her thoughts, and said swiftly:

"I am not mad; I am as sane as you. I have come here to lead you away from this spot—to take you out of his power."

"But he said he would return with Eric," faltered Pearl.

"He is deceiving you. I doubt if there is another with him, unless it is one of his villainous followers. He is the chief of the Brothers of the Red Heart."

The Girl Avenger's words threw Pearl into consternation. She knew not what to do. Had Harry indeed deceived her? Was he the dreadful being that this strange girl claimed?

"Take me away!" she cried, with sudden dread. "Quick—quick! We must not be here when he returns!"

She seized Ruth's arm, and hurried forward through the bushes. She was trembling and terrified. Ruth passed an arm around her waist and said:

"Do not fear. He shall not harm you. We will go away, and when he returns he will not find you."

Pearl stopped suddenly.

"Oh, I know not what to do!" she cried. "If Eric should be with him!"

"The chances are that you will sooner find the one whom you wish to meet if you go with me," urged Ruth. "I assure you I would do nothing that I did not believe for your good."

Pearl allowed Ruth to lead her away.

"I have a faithful old servant near at hand," said the Girl Avenger. "He is watching the horses on which we came to this spot. I came here hoping to complete my work of vengeance, but in rescuing you from that villain's hands, I feel more than repaid for my journey!"

"Did you follow him here?"

"Black Joe, my negro friend, saw my foe and another come in this direction."

"And another!" echoed Pearl. "Surely that was Eric."

"Perhaps. But if it was, the chances are that Philip Barret was but using him to serve some evil purpose of his own. Eric is your lover; no need to tell me that. Your face has revealed the story. Once I fancied that I loved this man who afterwards murdered my poor father. I believed him good and true. God grant that you are not deceived as I was!"

"Eric's heart is true," protested Pearl. "I know it is!"

"How long have you known him?"

The question confused Pearl a little. She stammered as she replied:

"Nearly three weeks."

"No longer?" exclaimed Ruth, in a tone of disappointment. "He is almost a stranger to you. You cannot know his heart."

Pearl was silent, though a flood of words surged to her lips. Within her heart she was sure that Eric was true as steel, yet she knew that she had no proof. Instinct alone told her that he was not a bad man.

They hurried onward without pausing until they entered a wooded defile. Suddenly Ruth drew Pearl into some thick bushes.

The ring of iron-shod hoofs came to their ears.

Some one was coming toward them.

"Keep quiet," breathed Ruth, with some excitement. "The chances are that foes are coming."

A moment later two horsemen swept into view, riding directly toward them.

They were Hickory Bill and Posey Pete.

Past the place where crouched the two girls swept the Chief of Cimarron and his satellite. Fainter and fainter grew the beat of horses' hoofs until they finally died out in the distance.

With a breath of relief, Ruth said:

"We will go on. I am sure that both of those men are villains. Their faces betray them."

"I believe that one of them aided in my abduction," declared Pearl.

"I hope they did not discover Black Joe. He is concealed in a secure spot where there is little danger of discovery."

They continued along the defile and had not gone far before they came to a densely wooded niche. Passing through the thick bushes they found themselves in a small glade, which was occupied by a negro and two horses.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MARK OF THE RED HEART.

"I 'CLARE ter goodness!" exclaimed the old darky. "Ise 'gun ter fink you' s nebber cum-in' back no mo', Missy Ruth. I was des gittin' skeered. Heard sum'uns go hoppin' by dis here place like de Ole Boy was arter 'em wif a splt stick. I des gwine ter go an' see 'f I c'n'd fine yo'. Who's dat dar wif yo'?"

"This is a friend, Joe, whom I found in the power of Philip Barret!"

"De bressed Lawd!" cried the negro, in horror. "Yo' don' mean dat, honey? Dat drefful critter w'ot killed pore ole Massa Foscolo? Gracious, chile! It des a mirrycal dat yo' s alive."

There was no shamming about the darky's actions, and Pearl began to believe that she had in truth been rescued from the hands of a villain.

"Eric is with him!" she gasped. "Something terrible may happen to Eric!"

The thought made her very excited, and she again halted as if undecided about something.

"He must be warned!" she cried. "I must go and find him!"

Ruth caught the tortured girl by the arm.

"Wait!" she said, firmly. "You cannot find him, and you may again fall into Philip Barret's hands."

"But I cannot remain here while he is in danger. Oh, what shall I do?"

"Be calm, and I will attempt to find him. You can remain with Joe."

"No! no! no!" sobbed Pearl, rapidly growing hysterical. "I will go with you—I must!"

Ruth looked serious.

"My dear friend," she said, impressively, "you cannot tramp over this rough territory. You are far from strong, as I can plainly see."

"Do not leave me!" begged the girl.

"But Eric—this one of whom you speak?"

"He must be found. We can find him together."

But Ruth knew that it would not do to make the attempt in Pearl's company. The poor girl's nerves were unstrung and by some accident she might precipitate them both into danger.

Upon inquiring, she discovered that Black Joe had seen Eric several times, and the darky declared that he would know him at sight. Why not send him in search for Pearl's lover? She soon saw that this was the only course to pursue, for Pearl would not allow her to leave her side.

Calling the darky to her, she carefully instructed him how to proceed. He listened attentively, but shook his head soberly when she had finished.

"I don' like ter fool wif dat dar critter," he said. "Ef he fin's ole Joe lone, it'll dess be a gone case wif dis coon."

"But you must not let him see you. You may be fortunate enough to find this Eric before he does or to get a chance to speak with him alone. For your life, do not guide Philip Barret to this spot or allow the other to bring him here. I know that you can be sharp and crafty when you choose, and now is the time for you to exercise your best skill."

"I'll do dat, honey; but Ise li'ble nebbher to cum back no mo'. Ef I don't, den yo' member dat ole Joe lubbed yo' like yo' was his own pickin' innin'."

With tears in his eyes, the faithful old negro moved away. A sudden feeling of fear seized upon Ruth's heart. What if Black Joe was indeed going to his doom? Her lips parted and she was on the point of calling him back when she checked the impulse. A score of times ere that had the old negro left her side saying that he would never return; but his fears had always been groundless. Nothing had harmed him.

Black Joe passed on into the bushes, only pausing to cast one brief look back at his young mistress.

Seeking a favorable spot, they sat down with their arms about each other, and for an hour they conversed. At the end of that time they felt well-acquainted, having learned each other's names and histories.

Pearl was greatly shocked at Ruth's tale of the terrible tragedy that had made her an orphan. Her tender heart was filled with pain and sympathy. At the same time she had learned to loathe the strange man who had rescued her from Casper Gonzalo's hands.

"What a terrible creature he is!" she murmured.

"Terrible, indeed," Ruth assented. "Yet he has the power to make people believe him good and true. As he lay sick in our little home and I watched by his bedside, he seemed the noblest of men. His words were of grand things. His face appeared grand and I thought him a perfect king among men. Alas! I could not see his black heart! He is a talented actor and plays the part of a cowboy finely; but his nimble tongue and crafty ways do not deceive me in the least. That red heart on his wrist betrays him."

Anxiously they awaited the return of Black Joe, but he came not. Finally Ruth began to grow alarmed.

"I fear that something has happened to him," she confessed.

Pearl was eager to go in search for the darky, but for a long time Ruth would not hear to it. Finally she became so alarmed that she consented.

They arose and left the little niche together. Back along the defile they made their way, Ruth taking certain precautions to avoid being observed by foes.

After a time they left the defile and Ruth led the way toward the spot where she had found Pearl. They did not go far before they found themselves looking down into a little hollow. To their surprise they saw four men before them.

With a whispered word of warning, Ruth drew her companion into a place of concealment, from which the four men could be plainly seen.

Three of the men were Hickory Bill, Posey Pete and Casper Gonzalo. The fourth was at least six feet tall, and wore a mask over his face. A little gasp of surprise came from Pearl's lips as she gazed at this masked man. There was something familiar about his appearance and his dress.

"It is he—the one who rescued me from the Spaniard!"

Hustler Harry? No, it could not be!

Ruth Foscolo's eyes glowed with a strange intensity.

"You are right!" she said. "That is Philip Barret!"

"But he is with those men—one of whom he rescued me from."

"A trick," declared Pearl. "Perhaps that was prearranged."

Hickory Bill and Posey Pete were sitting on a boulder. Casper was squatting on the ground. The masked man alone was standing, and he appeared to be talking while the others listened.

Both of the girls tried to catch his words, but he was too far away.

The man in mask seemed to be urging the others to do something about which they were reluctant. After a time he took a pocketbook from his pocket and counted out a roll of bills. These he held up before them, while he continued to talk.

"See!" whispered Ruth. "He is paying them for aiding him in his vile work."

There seemed to be some misunderstanding between the men, for Hickory Bill and Posey Pete both looked sullen and dissatisfied. The Spaniard suddenly became excited, and sprung to his feet, talking with great rapidity and making violent gestures.

Again the masked man produced his pocket-book and counted out more money. The discussion continued a few moments longer, and then the four seemed to come to an agreement, after which the mask handed the money to Hickory Bill.

The four talked a few moments more and then separated, Hickory Bill and his comrades going in one direction, while the masked man moved in another.

"The coward!" hissed the Girl Avenger. "He has hired those ruffians to do some piece of dirty work."

"Or paid them for something that they have already done," said Pearl.

"Yes. Perhaps it was for kidnapping you."

"Perhaps. Anyway I am satisfied that he is thoroughly a villain."

"He is, but his days are numbered. I have sworn to avenge my father, and something tells me that, girl though I am, I shall be given strength to accomplish my work."

Pearl shuddered, and gazed at Ruth as if fascinated.

"To kill him would be murder."

"No!" cried Ruth, softly. "To kill him would be justice! If those others were not so near, I would follow him now and attempt to end the work."

After a time they arose from their place of concealment and went cautiously forward.

"God grant that we may find Eric," breathed Pearl.

With extreme caution they moved along, but they were suddenly startled by coming upon a strange, jovial-looking old fellow, who was sitting on a large stone, idly whittling a stick that he had picked up. In an instant Ruth's revolver covered the stranger, who looked up and perceived them.

"Hole on, gal!" he cried, in alarm. "Don't shute!"

"Who are you?" demanded Ruth, sternly.

The man uttered an uneasy laugh.

"Me?" he grinned. "Ho! I'm Peter Hodge, frum Maine—Uncle Peter most folks calls me. Who be yeou?"

Ruth did not at once reply, but surveyed the Yankee critically. She was suspicious that he might prove to be a foe. Uncle Peter watched the revolver uneasily.

"Say," he ventured. "Is that eer pistol loaded?"

"To be sure it is."

"Wal, fer gracious' sakes jest p'int the ternal thing in sum other deerection. I hain't hankerin' to shuffle off this heer mortal bucket."

Ruth lowered the weapon. Evidently there was little to fear from this strange Down-Easter.

"Thankee, thankee," nodded Uncle Peter, the grin on his face growing still broader. "I didn't feel jest right roun' ther spiral collum with that lookin' inter my face. It kinder giv' me the cold chills an' made me feel kinder wamble-cropped roun' ther reegions ov ther congestive organs. That eer hain't no 'greeable feelin' ter sperience. Where ye goin', gals?"

"We are searching for friends," Ruth replied.

"Is that so? Don't guess yeou was lookin' fer an ole colt that looks like Peter Hodge round ther gills?"

"We were looking for a colored man."

"Jest my luck! Never see'd ther time 'fore this that I wished I was a nigger. I'd be willin' to be a monkey ef I could hav' sech gals as you tew s'archin' fer me—I would, by gum!"

The old fellow's declarations were so ridiculous and his manner so whimsical that the girls were amused. Uncle Peter arose, saying:

"Yeou tew defenseless gals hadn't orter be prowlin' round alone. P'raps I kin help yeou find this eer nigger. If yeou don't objec', I'll 'company ye."

Ruth hesitated, but there was a frank, open look on the Yankee's face which convinced her that she could trust him.

"Are you from Cimarron?" she inquired.

"Wal, I'm stoppin' roun' that eer village," the man from Maine admit'ed. "I'm lookin' arter my fu'st wife's brother. His name's Jinkins—Jonathan Jinkins. Don't s'pose either ov yeou know 'im?"

Both of the girls replied that they had no knowledge of such a person.

"It's ternal queer," declared Uncle Peter, soberly. "He's out heer summ'ers, but I can't git ontter his track. This heer's an all-thutterin' big kentry."

After a few moments more of similar talk, the

girls started on, accompanied by the man from Maine. As they walked along, it was with some difficulty that they repressed their unbidden companion from talking incessantly. Uncle Peter's tongue was started, and the old man found it hard work to keep silent.

They had proceeded some distance from the spot where Uncle Peter was met when they suddenly came upon a startling and horrifying spectacle.

At their feet lay the body of a man.

Ruth uttered a shriek as her eyes fell upon the dark, silent face and staring, sightless eyes.

Black Joe lay dead at her feet.

A knife-thrust had ended his life forever.

Upon his dark forehead was stamped a crimson heart.

CHAPTER XX.

IS HE FRIEND OR FOE?

AFTER a time Hustler Harry found Eric Craddoc, and together they returned to the spot where the cowboy said he had left Pearl. Their amazement in failing to find the girl where Harry had left her can better be imagined than described.

"She is gone!" cried Harry.

"Gone?" echoed Eric. "Great heavens! Where can she have gone?"

In an instant the lover was filled with the wildest alarm.

"They have found her and carried her away again!" he gasped.

"P'raps not ser bad as thet," said the Man from High Notch, attempting to be cheerful.

"She may hav' hoofed it away."

In vain Eric called her name. There was no answer—save the mocking echoes of his own voice.

"I fear the worst," he groaned.

The cowboy rapidly examined the surroundings. Within his own mind at first he was inclined to believe that Pearl had been found by foes, but just who he could not imagine. The sight of the horses standing where they had left them was quite as much of a surprise as Pearl's disappearance had been. His first thought was that whoever had carried away the girl had probably taken the horses.

"Cheer up, pard!" cried the cowboy. "Ther leetle gal hain't fell inter ther han's of no sech critters as roped her ther fu'st time. Leastways ther sign don't show it. Hyer's ther horses all safe."

"Which proves—what?"

"Thet she hain't in ther han's of a hoss-thief."

"It proves nothing," declared Eric. "She may have wandered away from this spot and been captured."

Harry could but acknowledge that this was true.

"Thar's only one thing ter do, pard," said the cowboy, impressively.

"What is that?"

"Find ther gal."

"And that we will do. If she is in danger I will rescue her if I have to go through fire and water."

"Thet's ther tork! I'll stan' by ye, pard."

They held a hurried consultation and decided to separate again and to return to that spot within two hours if they found nothing. This they considered the best course to pursue. Pearl might have become lonely and alarmed and wandered away. By separating and searching in opposite directions, they would stand a double chance of finding her.

Neither of them started in the right direction. As Eric walked along, his thoughts, as well as his eyes, were busy.

"Strange that she was not there," he muttered. "Harry said that he cautioned her to remain where he left her until he returned with me. He said that she seemed overjoyed at the thought of meeting me soon. Dear Pearl!

"That cowboy is a strange fellow. At times it seems to me that he is not a cowboy at all, but is acting a part. Once or twice I have detected a false note in his speech. It also seems that I have seen him as some other character besides the one which he now appears to be. There is something familiar about his appearance and his voice. I am well satisfied that a mystery surrounds him. He stood ready to aid me, and has proved a friend indeed, by rescuing Pearl from the bands of that Spaniard."

The more he thought about the strange cowboy the more puzzled he became.

An hour passed, and still Eric found no trace of his sweetheart.

"Heavens!" he cried, as a cold sweat caused by his anxiety and suspense stood out on his face. "I fear that she will not be found again as easily as before. The villainous kidnappers shall pay dearly for their work."

A few moments later he found himself gazing upon four men who had met in a little hollow. A cry of amazement came near bursting from his lips as he noted a familiar form.

"Hustler Harry!" he gasped. "Well, I will be hanged!"

With this expression of amazement, he made

haste to find a secure spot from which he could watch the four men but could not be seen. This he succeeded in doing.

"Who are those he is talking to?" Eric asked himself. "They look like a trio of ruffians. By Jupiter! one of them is the fellow whom he knocked out in the Silver Palace Saloon the other night."

The tall man's back was toward Eric, but suddenly the fellow turned so that the astonished spy saw that his face was covered by a mask.

"Crooked work!" hissed the young man. "I knew that was Hustler Harry the moment I set my eyes upon him. It is foolish for him to think of disguising himself in that rig by simply putting a mask over his face."

"But what is the meaning of this meeting with those fellows? Is Hustler Harry a traitor? I begin to think so. Is it possible that he did not rescue Pearl at all? One of those fellows down there is a Spaniard; I can tell by his clothes. He must be the very one that the cowboy claims to have overpowered and bound. He is free now."

"I wish I could hear what Hustler Harry is saying. It strikes me that he is trying to persuade those fellows to do something. Ha! I was right! He produces a pocketbook. This is growing very interesting."

Eric witnessed the very scene that Pearl and Ruth saw from the opposite side of the hollow, but little he dreamed that the girl he loved was so near.

"He is a traitor!" declared Eric, beneath his breath, as he saw the masked man pass the money to Hickory Bill. "He has lied to me. He has bought the services of these villains, the wretch! His story of the rescue of Pearl was a lie! The chances are that he has just paid them to keep her confined somewhere. Thank Heaven! The vail has been stripped from his face before he deceived me further. Wait till we meet again. I will force him to guide me to the place where Pearl is confined or I will put a bullet through his black heart!"

The lover was in deadly earnest, and trembled from head to foot with the intensity of his passion.

He watched the four men as they parted, and then stole silently away after the one who wore the mask.

"Now I will soon force the truth from his lips!" he gritted through his set teeth. "To think that I was deceived by him!"

Not for a moment did Eric doubt that the masked man was Hustler Harry. The dress, build, gesture and general appearance was the same.

"Some one accused him of being the chief of the Brothers of the Red Heart the other night," muttered Eric. "I thought then that the charge was absurd. He appeared like a stranger in Cimarron, but I fancy that he has been an inhabitant of the town longer than I thought. He may have sailed under another name, for it is evident that he is a crafty fellow and a perfect actor. It may be that he is the chief of the Red Heart Brotherhood. If so, I understand that little scene just witnessed. He has paid those desperadoes to deliver Pearl into his hands."

Eric hurried along on the trail of the masked man, resolved to overtake and stop him as soon as they were far enough from the hollow. But his plan was a failure. Whether the mask knew that he was pursued or not, certain it is that he suddenly disappeared and Eric Craddoc saw nothing more of him.

Eric was thoroughly exasperated with himself for being so easily deluded.

"Now what is to be done?" he asked himself as he paused in a helpless way. "I have not a clew to work on. It seems foolish to ramble aimlessly about with no plan or well-defined course of action in my mind, but I see nothing else to do."

He was quite at a loss how to move. He now felt sure that Hustler Harry was a traitor and that he must depend upon himself alone to find and rescue Pearl. The thought of her being in the power of wicked men filled his heart with despair.

"If they harm a hair on her head," he muttered, "I will rend them limb from limb! It makes my heart burn within me to think of that pure girl in the hands of such wretches. But God will not allow them to harm her. I have seen many girls, but never one moved my heart as she has. I believe we were made for each other. But how am I to save her from the hands of the kidnappers?"

He struck his knuckles against his forehead and tried to think. For some reason his wits seemed to be in a strangely-mixed condition. Usually he was clear-headed and quick of thought. Now he seemed quite the reverse.

"I fear that I made a mistake in not following those three ruffians," he thought. "They might have led me directly to Pearl. But it is too late to retrieve that blunder now."

He bowed his head and stared moodily at the ground. A moment later he looked up with a sudden determination pictured on his countenance.

"We were to meet back where the horses are,"

he said aloud. "I will go back there, and when he comes, I will force the truth from his lips."

This seemed to be the only thing to do, and at once he started. He had made half the distance when he suddenly came upon a startling spectacle.

Seated on a bowlder not twenty feet away was a large man who held a cocked revolver leveled straight at Eric's heart.

"Hold up thar, you slick-lookin' galoot," commanded the man with the revolver.

CHAPTER XXI.

A CAPTIVE AGAIN.

It was Hickory Bill.

The ruffian looked decidedly ferocious as he scowled savagely at Eric.

"Wat yer sneakin' long hyer fer?" demanded the bully.

"I don't know as that is any of your business," was Eric's cool reply.

"Ye don't, hay? Waal, then I'll make it my business. I hav' hafe er mine ter putt a lead pill through ye."

Eric said nothing, but watched him closely.

Hickory Bill glared at the young man in grim silence for several moments. The ruffian appeared to be considering something.

"How kem ye hyer?" he finally demanded.

"Shank's mare is in a measure responsible for my presence."

Eric did not think it wise to tell the bully that he had a horse near at hand. On second thought, however, he realized that Hustler Harry had probably told him everything.

"I reckon ye mean by that that ye walked," said Bill. "Waal, my advice is fer ye ter tarn tail t'other way. Ef ye stopps round hyer ye'r mighty apt ter run ag'in' a funeral. This are an unhealthy locality."

"And why, pray?"

"'Kase sech fellers as you hain't wanted hyer."

Eric Craddoc looked the bully fair in the eyes.

"That is a poor answer," he coolly asserted.

"Poor or good it's all ye'll git. Ef ye hang round, ye'll git sent on a trip over ther river."

"Who will send me?"

"Feller 'bout my size. Took a good squar' look at me. I've swallered better men than you be."

"In your mind," sneered Eric.

Bill uttered an oath.

"Ye don't want ter give me much o' yer sass. I'd jest like ther fun o' lettin' daylight through ye."

There was a wicked gleam in the bully's eyes which indicated that he was not lying. Murder to such a wretch was little worse than killing a dog.

"What do you want of me?" demanded Eric.

"Want ter warn ye," was the reply. "Want ter tell ye that ye'd better git back ter Cimarron. Thar hain't room fer ye hyer."

Eric's blood was started.

"Well, I am not going back to Cimarron till I choose," he asserted. "I am not going to give you a clean field in which to execute your villainy. Where is Pearl Molina?"

Hickory Bill scanned the young man still closer.

"Hain't no funny bisness 'bout that," he thought. "He don't know whar ther gal is."

"Whar's who?" he demanded, aloud.

"Pearl Molina—Martel Molina's daughter. Don't lie now. What have you done with her?"

"Young feller, ye'r 'way off," Bill declared, soberly. "I don't know nothin' 'bout no gal."

Which was literally true, although the bully thought he was lying.

"That is thin," declared the young man. "I tell you now, you shall suffer if she is not at once delivered into my hands."

"Get out!" and the chief uttered a hoarse, short laugh. "I tell ye I don't know nothin' 'bout her. Wat's ther racket? Wat's hap-pened?"

Eric uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"If you do not know anything about it, what did Hustler Harry pay you money for a short time ago?"

"Hustler Harry—?" repeated Bill, and then stared blankly at Eric for a moment.

"Yes, Hustler Harry, the pretended cowboy. I saw him with you and your two companions a short time ago. He wore a mask, but such a disguise is insufficient to conceal his identity from my eyes."

Hickory Bill's look of wonder changed to a grin.

"Reckon ther boss 'ud be thunderin' mad ef he know ye saw us," the bully admitted.

"Then you acknowledge that it was Hustler Harry that I saw?" cried Eric, eagerly.

"No, I don't nuther," growled the chief, suddenly appearing startled. "Reckon I didn't say no sech thing."

"But you virtually acknowledged it."

"Vercherally be hanged. I hain't givin' nobody away. Reckon 'tw'u'dn't be healthy fer me ef I did. The cow-puncher hain't no sech an onery low down cuss as I tuck 'im fer though. His money's good as any other galoot's. I've got his stamp on my mug, but I hain't sech a

tarnal fool as ter try 'im ag'in, an' him ther goose w'at lays ther yaller eggs."

The ruffian's words caused young Craddoc to feel sure that he was right in believing the cowboy a traitor. Even while he had been trying to shield the Man from High Notch, Hickory Bill had "given him dead away."

"He shall pay for his treachery!" asserted the young man, with some excitement.

"Waal, now I'd raythur you'd fool with him than I sh'u'd," admitted the tough. "I've heerd o' playin' with er muel's heels, but I never speriened anythin' like et till I run ag'in' thet thar galoot's fists. Tain't often what I meets a better man nor I am, but when I do, I cotton ter him instanter."

"But we'll let thet drap. My arm's gittin' tired an' I don't want ter hole this gun up hyer much longer. So I'll jess say as a final warnin' thet you'd better git back to the Cimarron ef ye wants ter save yer skull. I'll head ye in thet direction. Right 'bout, face."

"What do you want?"

"Want ye ter turn round t'other way durned ed lively."

Bill shook the revolver menacingly.

Eric realized that there was nothing else for him to do, so he obeyed the order.

"Good!" came from the ruffian's lips. "Now w'en I give ther word yer ter march straight ahead an' not turn roun' while yer within pistol-shot. Ef ye do, I'll salt ye! Ketch?"

"Your words are plain enough."

"Kirect. Go ahead, an' mind not ter look round."

Eric obeyed and walked forward until he thought himself beyond easy pistol-shot. Then he looked back.

Hickory Bill had vanished.

As soon as Eric started, Bill arose and stole silently away. He was soon beyond Eric's view should he look around and at once broke into a run.

After he had run quite a distance, Bill settled into a walk.

"Reckon I'm shut o' him," he muttered.

"Now ter find Pete an' Cas."

He hurried onward, occasionally casting a look over his shoulder to make sure that he was not pursued.

"Ther slick youngster war kinder taken back w'en he saw ther han' I held," chuckled the bully. "I found out w'at I wanted ter know wi'out axin' questions. He don't know whar ther gal is. Now ef we kin find her."

A short time later he was met by Posey Pete, who was somewhat excited.

"We've foun' her," announced the bummer.

"Ther gal?"

"Yas. She's on hyer a piece, but thar's er-nother gal and an ole feller wi' her. They hav' cum onto a dead nigger, an' t'other gal's takin' on terrible. Cas sent me back ter keep ye frum cumin' up an' larmin' em."

Hickory Bill was delighted.

"Things hain't workin' so bad arter all," he declared, with a grin. "We'll scoop her ag'in an' capter ther extray ducats what Old Rocks offered. I'd jes' lives hav' his munny's ole Molina's, an' thar hain't so much danger playin' ther game he's laid out fer us. He's a sharp galoot an' he's woolin' ther people in great shape."

"Yas, he's playin' a sharp game, but we'uns has 'im inter our grip."

"An' we'll squeeze 'im. He'll pan out rich, an' don't ye fergit it. Posey, our forchunes are cummin'."

"Ef I ever git back ter Cimarron, I kalkerlate ter have one high ole blow-out."

"But ye must keep yer jaw tired. Reckon ye'd git a knife between ther ribs ef ye went ter blabbin'."

The old toper turned white.

"Ye can't git likker ernuff inter me ter make me blab!" he declared.

"So much ther better fer you," said Bill. "Now me must git ther gal inter our han's ag'in. We don't want no others. We must manage ter scoop jest her."

They moved forward, Posey Pete leading, and enjoing strict silence and caution on his companion.

After a short time they came upon Casper, who was crouching behind a clump of bushes. He motioned them to move cautiously.

Slowly they crept forward, and peered through the bushes. Uncle Peter, Pearl, and Ruth were still beside the negro. Both of the girls were weeping.

"That's our bird," chuckled Hickory Bill, as his eyes fell upon Pearl. "But how are we goin' ter ketch her?"

"Twon't do ter jump onto all three," observed Posey Pete.

"Waal, I guess not!" came from the bully's lips in a derisive manner. "Thet ole galoot hain't no clam, an' I'll bet he'll fight like er cornered cat. I kin sw'ar as how he kerries ther gun. No, that won't do."

"Ef we c'dole her away."

"But how?"

The Spaniard was silent. He preferred to think instead of talk.

"Waal, what idee you got in yer head, Cas?" asked the bully.

"Nothing at all just now," was the reply. "I think that perhaps something fortunate for us will happen."

All three lay still and watched Uncle Peter and the two girls for a time. Pearl was trying to comfort Ruth, who was quite heartbroken. The watchers could not hear their words, but not a movement or a gesture escaped their sharp eyes.

"Wonder w'at struck ther nig?" asked Bill.

"Dunno," replied Pete. "But it's plain thet he's run ag'in' his last sickness. It's a case of good-by, John."

After a time, Ruth decided to go for the horses, leaving Uncle Peter and Pearl with the dead negro. Upon the back of one of the animals she would convey Black Joe's body back to Cimarron and bury it there.

The stamp of the red heart on the negro's forehead told plainly that the dreadful deed was committed by her most deadly foe. Over the body of her faithful old slave she revived her oath of vengeance.

When Ruth had departed, Uncle Peter attempted to cheer Pearl with kindly words. The girl's tender heart was torn with grief on account of the great agony endured by her newfound friend. Uncle Peter's manner seemed harsh and unpleasant just then, and she turned from him and walked away.

She had no thought of going far just then, but with bowed head she advanced straight toward the spot where the trio of villains were concealed.

A gleam of eagerness and delight shone in three pairs of eyes.

"Great Christopher!" whispered Hickory Bill.

"She's cummin' hyer!"

"Waal, ye'r a-shoutin'!" gasped Posey Pete.

"Caramba! Be silent!" hissed Casper.

And straight into the net walked the unsuspecting girl. With her eyes fixed upon the ground, she had no warning of danger till a huge hand closed over her mouth, and she felt herself in the grasp of some one who had sprung upon her.

"Good Lawd!" chuckled Hickory Bill. "How slick!"

CHAPTER XXII.

FROM BAD TO WORSE.

Not a cry or a sound alarmed Uncle Peter Hodge, who was so near the unfortunate girl. Pearl made a desperate struggle for a moment, and then became utterly helpless, although she did not swoon. Then Pusey Pete's ragged coat was wrapped about her head, to prevent an outcry, and she was borne rapidly away.

"This w'at I call a sweet piece o' luck," declared Hickory Bill.

"We shall be followed," said the thoughtful Casper. "One should remain behind, to lead in a wrong direction those who come. There is yet some danger."

"Ye'r right, ole man," acknowledged Bill; "an' I'm thar galoot fer that job. You two kerry thar gal back ter ther cave, an' be ready ter work ther leetle game o' Old Rocks. I'll find him, ef posseble."

They separated, Hickory Bill turning back. Posey Pete and the Spaniard did not pause. As soon as they were so far away that any cry the girl might make would not be heard by the man from Maine, the bummer removed his coat from around Pearl's head. She was nearly unconscious from suffocation.

"Twouldn't a' did ter kep' her wrapped like that a great time," Pete observed.

Casper made no reply, but hurried on. The Spaniard was a man of deeds rather than words.

Pearl soon revived, and noticing this, the old toper declared:

"Ef ye go ter squakin', gal, it'll be ther wuss fer ye. Jest keep still an' ye won't be hurted."

She did not answer, but her face showed that her heart was filled with a terrible despair. Once more she was in the hands of those terrible men. What did the future hold in store for her?

Casper bore the girl along with comparative ease. The Spaniard was stronger than he appeared to be. Once or twice he stopped to rest, but he did not allow the bummer to attempt to carry her.

Within a short time they reached the small cave where Pearl had first been held a captive. Once more she was carried into the dreaded place.

"Hyer we are," observed Posey Pete, with a flourish. "An' I'm as dry's er Cape Cod mack-eriel. I don't think much o' gittin' ser fur inter ther wilderness thet er feller can't git er whiff frum er gin-shop. My hull durned stummic's sh'ivlin' up, it's so blamed dry."

Casper raked together the half-burned brands of the fire, and placing them on the bed of coals, soon had a fire burning briskly.

"Now, comrade," said the Spaniard, "if you will go to the spot where the horses are concealed and bring some food, perhaps the senorita would eat. Surely she must be hungry, for the day is well spent."

Pete obeyed, and soon returned with a bundle,

which he placed in Casper's hands. The Spaniard undid the bundle, and soon approached Pearl with food, but the girl refused to eat.

"You must, señorita," said Casper, firmly. "I am quite sure that you have had nothing to-day."

Pearl did not reply. She lay on the dead boughs, with her face buried on her arms, her whole attitude one of deep despair.

Casper touched her shoulder, but still she did not look up.

"I do not wish to be harsh," declared the Spaniard, "but I must insist that you do eat."

The grasp upon her shoulder became firmer, and she slowly lifted a beautiful tear-stained, despairing face.

"I want nothing," she murmured.

"But again I say you *must* eat. You shall not starve yourself, though I believe you would like to do so. A little of this will give you much strength. You should be cheerful, for you are not to be harmed. We have brought you here to be held for money. When that is given us, you shall be restored to your father, and we shall go far away."

"Yas," chipped in Posey Pete. "I don't reckon as how anywehers 'round Cimarron 'ud be healthy fur us arter she tells who did ther job. We'll all strike fur fresh fields and paxtures new."

"If you will return me to my father at once, I will pledge you my word that you shall not be molested for what you have done and shall receive a reward for doing so."

Casper shook his head and Posey Pete broke into a shrill laugh.

"I don't reckon we'll give up a good thing when we've got our fingers on it," remarked the bummer. "It's no go, leetle gal. We'd like ter commerdate ye, but it hain't bisness. Yer ole dad might not feel like rewardin' us ter no great extent, an' he might even go fur 'nuff ter sock us inter ther hog pen what ther o' Cimarron calls a jail."

"I am sure that I can persuade him to do anything," declared the girl. "I will give you my pledged word that you shall not be harmed, but shall be rewarded."

"Kan't do it. Ye see yer old dad 'd hav' a bad holt onter us then. In ther game w'ot we're playin', we're goin' ter hav' a bad holt onter sumbuddy else as'll pan out ther skids."

Pearl saw that to say anything further was useless, and once more she sunk back on the boughs.

But Casper was determined that she should eat, and he remained by her side, urging her to do so till finally she did crowd down a few mouthfuls.

"That is good," said the Spaniard. "You will now feel better."

But she did not. Her heart was too full of bitterness for food to soothe its aching.

The afternoon was well spent and night near at hand.

Posey Pete and Casper sat down near together and conversed in low tones. Five, ten minutes passed and then a sound as of a stealthy step came to the ruffians' ears. They started, laid their hands on their weapons and peered into the darkness.

The next instant there was a bright flash and a loud report.

The Spaniard leaped to his feet, uttering a yell as if hard hit, and then fell forward on his face.

Posey Pete also sprung to his feet just as a tall form leaped out of the darkness. The newcomer fired as he sprung forward, but the old toper was untouched.

"Cuss ye!" cried the bummer shrilly, as he wrenched out a revolver. "Ye've spotted Cas, but I'll—"

He did not finish the sentence, for the stranger had seized his revolver and thrust it aside, at the same time grasping him by the throat.

"You miserable dog!" he hissed. "I will end your life and your dirty work now!"

Then both men went down, locked fast in each other's embrace. For a moment a fierce and terrific struggle ensued, during which Pete's revolver was discharged. The battle suddenly ceased, and the victor arose to his feet, leaving the other lying silent on the ground.

Pearl had watched the encounter with clasped hands and wildly beating heart. She believed that the tall man was Hustler Harry.

As the victor turned toward her, she uttered an exclamation of mingled joy and fear.

"You have saved me again!" she cried. "You are not—"

She stopped in amazement.

The victor was not the Man from High Notch.

"Yes, I have come to save you," said Horace Kelnot, stepping toward her. "I saw these ruffians bring you here, and I followed. Good fortune aided me, and I have conquered them both."

For a moment Pearl was dumb. Then she thought that it was better to be rescued by Kelnot than to again fall into the hands of the treacherous cowboy.

"Oh, take me from this place!" she cried, as she sprang toward him.

Horace Kelnot caught her hands in both of his own.

"That I will do, Miss Molina," he declared. "You shall be with your father soon."

"I shall never forget your bravery and goodness," she murmured.

For some reason the words seemed to choke her. She shuddered, as she hastily withdrew her hands from his grasp. Kelnot noted this, and his face turned quite pale.

"I have settled this fellow, I think," he observed, as he turned away and touched the motionless body of the Spaniard with the toe of his boot. "It seemed a little tough to shoot him down like that, but they were two against me and I *had* to do it. I hope you will think none the less of me for the act, Miss Molina."

"No, no! It does seem awful, but they were such wicked men. Is the other dead?"

"No, I think not unless his head is pretty tender. I struck him with the butt of my revolver. I am sure that it was not a baby's blow, but it was not hard enough to kill him. I settled the Spaniard first, as he is known to be a desperate fighter. This old bummer I ought to have handled easier than I did."

He stooped and examined Posey Pete.

"Just put to sleep," he declared, quietly. "He will be all right to-morrow. But come, Miss Molina, let's get out of this place."

Pearl was quite willing to go, and she accepted the arm which Kelnot offered. With no difficulty at all they reached the open air.

"Thank Heaven!" breathed Pearl. "I am out of that cave, and I hope never to return there again. I should die if I did!"

Kelnot asked her to give the particulars of her abduction, which she did. He then informed her that her father was quite ill, though not dangerously so.

"I have a horse not far from here," he said. "We can reach it ere dark, and you can ride back to Cimarron."

As they walked along, Kelnot talked freely, although Pearl said little. He told her how by a lucky chance he had come in that direction and had seen Pete and Casper as they carried her into the cave. How he had followed them and crept slowly forward in the darkness, revolver in hand. She had witnessed his fortunate struggle with her captors.

"It would have been no more than justice to have shot them both," he declared. "If Posey Pete ever shows his head in Cimarron again he will surely hang. A rescuing party from the camp would have been organized if your father had sanctioned the move. He thought that a few trusty friends could do more than a large number, many of whom might be foes."

"And you saved me single-handed!" said Pearl, half-admiringly, despite her usual aversion of the man. "How can I ever repay you?"

"I ask no pay for such a deed," he murmured, as he bent his head nearer hers. "I only hope that you will look more favorably upon me. You know that my heart's desire is to make you my wife."

Horace Kelnot was not a man to mince matters. He believed in boldness.

"That can never be," replied Pearl, firmly. "You have placed me deeply in your debt, and I will do 'most anything in my power to show my obligation—but that I cannot do. I hope you will understand me when I say that I do not love you—that I love another. I shall always think kindly of you as a brave man. I can say no more."

A strange, unfathomable look came into Kelnot's face. He seemed on the point of uttering harsh words, but checked himself suddenly.

Then they walked on in silence.

The twilight shadows were gathering thickly. Darkness was at hand. On either side of them were high banks, rocks and bushes. Suddenly the rocks and bushes seemed to give birth to half a dozen dark forms. In a moment they were surrounded by masked men.

Kelnot uttered a shout and jerked forth a revolver. But he did not use it. There came the sound of a heavy blow, and with a groan he pitched forward on his face.

Then Pearl was seized and borne away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

KELNOT REPORTS TO MOLINA.

LATE that night, Horace Kelnot rapped on the door of Martel Molina's residence. He was admitted by a woman whom he himself had placed in charge of the deranged man.

"How is he?"

Kelnot asked the question in a low tone, and the woman replied:

"Much better, though he takes on constantly. At times he appears a trifle wild."

"Is he in his room?"

"Yes."

Then Kelnot advanced along the hall and quietly opened the door leading into Molina's private business room. He entered and found the mine-owner lying on the sofa. Molina started up as the proprietor of the Silver Palace came in.

"Ah!" he cried. "Is it you? Do you bring me news of Pearl?"

Kelnot advanced calmly and sat down in a chair, at the same time motioning the mine-owner to again be seated.

"Sit down, Molina," he said, quietly. "I cannot tell you everything in a breath."

"Then you have news?" eagerly persisted the unhappy father, as he sunk back on the sofa.

"You can tell me something of her?"

"I have much to tell you."

"You have seen her—have you?"

"Don't get into such a flurry, Molina," said Kelnot, with an air of anxiety. "You are far from strong, and excitement will injure you."

The mine-owner uttered a groan, and put one hand to his head, around which was a bandage.

"I can bear excitement better than suspense," he declared.

"Well, if you will have patience, I will tell you everything in the shortest possible time. There is much to tell. By a fortunate accident I found your daughter."

Again Molina sprung up.

"You did?—where is she?"

Once more Kelnot motioned him to be seated, but Molina sprung forward and caught the proprietor of the Silver Palace by the shoulder.

"Answer me!" he shouted. "Where is she?"

"That I cannot tell," acknowledged Kelnot, with apparent reluctance.

Molina reeled back a step.

"Do not know?" he repeated, as if uncertain that he had heard aright. "Yet you say that you found her. What do you mean? Heavens, man! don't be forever in telling me the truth! This suspense is terrible!"

"Sit down," Kelnot again commanded. "I have promised to tell you everything as briefly as possible, and I will do so."

Molina sank down on the sofa, covering his drawn face with his hands for an instant, and gasping hoarsely:

"Go on!"

"As I said before, by a fortunate accident, I came upon two men just as they were carrying your daughter into a little cave. I laid low, and was not observed. After they had entered, I crept forward and found the mouth of the cave just beyond a screen of bushes. At first I did not know what to do; but I finally decided to attempt Pearl's rescue. With a revolver in my hand, I crept into the cave, not knowing what danger I might encounter. After a time, I saw the glow of a light far ahead. Slowly I crept onward until I could see a small fire and two men crouching near it. Beyond, on a mass of dead boughs, lay your daughter. Slowly I crept nearer the villainous kidnappers, but at an unlucky moment, I made a slight noise. Both men sprung up, and without the least hesitation I put a ball through the head of one. I then grappled with the other, and succeeded in knocking him senseless without much difficulty."

"You conquered them both?" exclaimed the mine-owner, with mingled wonder and admiration.

"But Pearl—you rescued her?"

"Yes. We left the cave together, leaving the kidnappers where they lay. I had a horse not far from the cave, and as we walked along, Pearl told me of her adventures. She had a strange story to relate. The men whom we left behind us were the ones who had originally abducted her. They carried her to the cave in which I found her, then one of them went away. The night passed, and it was near midday when suddenly the fellow who left the camp in company with Eric Craddoc appeared. There was a mock struggle, and then the cowboy pretended to bind and disarm Pearl's captor."

"Pretended to?" gasped Molina.

"Yes," said Kelnot, calmly, "pretended to, for the two were in league. Whether Pearl was kidnapped at the instigation of this fellow who calls himself Hustler Harry or not, certain it is that the cowboy has joined hands with the villains."

"How do you know this?"

"I have no positive proof except that Pearl herself saw him talking with the three villains who were perpetrators of this dirty piece of work. After he had gone through the farce of binding the guard, he led Pearl from the cave and told her that he would guide her to Eric Craddoc's side. After a time they came to a place where two horses were concealed, but Craddoc was not there. He told her to wait and he would find the young Easterner. Shortly after he disappeared, a young woman found Pearl and induced her to go away with her. A short time later they came upon four men conversing in a hollow, and Pearl recognized one of them as the cowboy, though she said he wore a mask. Two of the others were the kidnappers, and the fourth was a desperate comrade of theirs. The cowboy was addressing the three, and he finally paid them money."

Martel Molina had listened breathlessly, and now he uttered an exclamation.

"That proves that he is their leader and the instigator of the whole business."

Kelnot smiled.

"That is what I believe," he declared.

"But Craddoc—do you think him in league with the cowboy?"

Handy Horace shook his head.

"That I dare not say. He may or may not

be. The future alone can reveal whether he is an honest man or a villain."

"But what next happened to Pearl? How did she come to fall into the villains' hands again?"

"Unfortunately she wandered away from her friend and walked straight into the kidnappers' hands. They carried her back to the cave from which I rescued her."

"But that is not all," cried Molina, with great impatience. "You say that you do not know where she is now. What happened?"

"Ere we reached the place where I left my horse, we were surrounded by masked men. I was given no time to resist, but was promptly knocked senseless, and I bear the mark of the blow now."

He removed his hat, which he had neglected to do till now, and revealed a bandage wrapped around his head.

"The villains did not spare their strength," he declared, with a look of anger. "My head rings now with the concussion. How long I lay in an insensible condition I cannot say, but when I revived, it was pitch dark. I was alone where I had fallen. The masked men had carried Pearl away I knew not where. As soon as I could command my strength enough to walk, I sought my horse, and at once returned to camp. From the Silver Palace I came directly here."

This was the whole of Horace Kelnot's story. When he had finished, Molina started forward and caught him by the arm.

"What do you think? Pearl has not again fallen into the hands of her former captors?"

"No, I am sure not. One of them is seriously wounded, if not dead. The other was unconscious when I left the cave. Besides that, there were too many of those who sprung upon us."

"But who were they?"

"The Brothers of the Red Heart!"

Molina uttered a groan and sunk back.

"That devilish organization!" he muttered. "They hate me, for I have spoken openly against them. Now that they have the chance, they will ruin me."

"There is little doubt of that," Handy Horace admitted. "I believe that entire band to be desperadoes and villains of the worst stamp. I also have an idea that I can point out their chief."

"You can? Whom do you suspect?"

"Hustler Harry!"

"The cowboy?"

"Exactly."

"But this cowboy is a stranger in Cimarron. The Brothers of the Red Heart have been known to exist for some time."

Kelnot leaned forward and looked the mine-owner fairly in the eyes, while he said, impressively:

"Partner, Hustler Harry is no more a stranger in Cimarron than I am! I have not been here a great while myself, but I am far from a stranger."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that this pretended cowboy is a most artful actor. As Hustler Harry he appears to be a stranger. Under another name he has lived in this camp longer than I."

Molina was thunderstruck. He gazed at the proprietor of the Silver Palace blankly, not quite able to catch his meaning.

"How—what do you mean?"

"Do you remember Big Jack Diggs?"

"Yes."

"You know that he suddenly and quite mysteriously disappeared a little over two weeks ago?"

"Yes."

"Well, can you not see the connection between Jack Diggs and Hustler Harry?"

The mine-owner looked amazed.

"No, I cannot," he admitted.

"It is quite plain," laughed Handy Horace. "Suspicion was pointing strongly toward Diggs as the perpetrator of several crooked jobs. So, Diggs vanishes and Hustler Harry appears."

"But you cannot mean that the two men are identical."

"That is just what I do mean."

Molina looked incredulous.

"Why Big Jack Diggs was a ragged ruffian!" he exclaimed.

"A piece of acting," said Kelnot. "As a cowboy, the fellow is doing more acting. I have not a doubt that he could appear like a polished gentleman if he chose."

"You may be right," admitted Molina, slowly, "and if you are, the chances are that this Craddoc is one of his right-hand men. Craddoc has deluded the girl into thinking that she loves him, and may entice her to marry him, hoping to get a grip on my property by so doing. By heavens! if he does I will kill him with my own hand!"

In terrible excitement, Molina sprung up and paced the floor. Kelnot watched him closely.

"It may not be so bad," Handy Horace observed. "This young fellow may be deceived by the pretended cowboy. If so, he is acting honestly. He appears like an honest fellow."

"But I have no faith in his honesty. I am satisfied that he is a scoundrel."

Kelnot was silent.

"What is to be done?" demanded Martel Mo-

lina, as he paused and laid his hand on the shoulder of his visitor. "Must I sit still and wait the pleasure of these ruffians?"

"By no means. If you can think of nothing, I have a scheme to propose."

"But I can think of something. Kelnot, you must guide me to the cave where Pearl was confined; you must show me the spot where you were knocked senseless by the masked men. Nothing may come of it, but I am determined to go there."

Handy Horace shook his head, a look of concern in his dark eyes as he looked into the mine-owner's haggard face.

"I fear you over-estimate your strength," he said, earnestly. "It will not do for you to take such a trip now."

"I am not going to take it now, but I will be ready in the morning. I shall get a few hours of sleep, for I will take a powder. In the morning I shall be fresh and ready for the trip. Do you promise?"

Kelnot was reluctant.

"It will never do," he declared. "I fear you do not know how bad you have been. The physician said that for a time you were quite crazy. Any unusual excitement may bring on another spell of that kind—may, indeed, prove fatal."

But Molina was obstinate.

"I insist on going," he said, firmly. "I cannot lay still while Pearl is in peril. It would be worse for me than to stir about. You must promise to guide me."

"No, I will not promise; but I will come over in the morning. If you are better and still insist on going, perhaps I will guide you. I will make no other agreement."

Molina was obliged to accept these terms, and after a few moments more of conversation, Kelnot arose and took his departure.

CHAPTER XXIV.

UNCONSCIOUSLY BETRAYED BY HIRED TOOLS.

EARLY the following morning, Kelnot and Molina rode away into the hills. Handy Horace had found the mine-owner appearing much better than he expected.

"Now," said Molina, as they rode along, "if we can only find something that will give us a clew to the whereabouts of the secret den of this band of ruffians known as the Brothers of the Red Heart our time will not be wasted."

"I fear that we shall be unsuccessful in that respect," confessed Horace Kelnot. "The gang is crafty, and it is not at all likely that their stronghold can be easily found."

"Providence may aid us."

"That is true; but during my life I have noticed that Providence seldom takes a hand in anything of this kind. I have little confidence in receiving aid from any unusual channel."

"But something must happen!" cried the mine-owner, desperately. "Pearl must be saved!"

"I feel the same as you do in that respect, and while you slept I was not idle. I have organized a sort of search-party and have divided it into squads, each squad in command of a competent man. The men are all under my pay and my direction. While we are away in the hills, they are to remain quiet. Upon our return, I shall send them out to thoroughly scour the country. No stone shall be left unturned."

For several moments Martel Molina was silent. Finally he leaned toward Kelnot and extended his hand.

"Kelnot," he said, with deep feeling, "how can I thank you for your thoughtfulness? I, at first, was opposed to raising a great hue-and-cry and getting the whole town out on the hunt. I thought that such a move would be unwise. You submitted to my desire, although you plainly said that I was making a disastrous delay. Now, just when I begin to regret that I did not listen to you, I find that you have anticipated my desire. But why did you not put out the searchers at once?"

Handy Horace pressed the mine-owner's hand warmly, while his blue eyes glowed with a look of deep satisfaction.

"Partner," he replied, "I did intend to put out the searchers at first, but on second thought I decided not to do so. We may learn something of importance while we are out that it would be well for the boys to know before they start. Besides that, much time will not be lost. It is not yet sunrise, and if we hasten we can be back in Cimarron ere the forenoon is half-spent."

"You are right," said the mine-owner. "Let's hurry on."

Away through the gray morning gloom they dashed. The cool air and brisk motion seemed to give Molina renewed vigor. He sat on his horse as firmly and gracefully as a circus equestrian could have done.

Into the hills they plunged, Handy Horace leading the way.

"Do you think you can lead me to that cave without difficulty?" asked Molina.

"I am not sure," was Kelnot's cautious reply; "but I hope to."

"Do you think we shall find any one there?"

"Possibly—a man with a bullet in his head. Nothing more."

"Do you know these fellows who kidnapped Pearl? I believe you did not tell me who they were."

"Yes, I know them—know them well. When I show you the one who stopped my bullet, I fancy you will be able to name his companions."

"Ha! Then they are well known in Cimarron?"

"Well, I should remark."

"I thought as much. I fancied that I recognized the voice of one as that of an old fellow who asked me for the price of a drink a few days ago."

Sunrise found them well on their journey, and pressing swiftly forward. Martel Molina showed no signs of weariness, though Kelnot watched him constantly with anxiety. The knowledge that his beloved daughter was in danger, gave him strength and energy.

The sun slowly crept upward. Finally, as they were passing along a short, wooded defile, Handy Horace announced:

"This is the very spot where I was knocked senseless, and Pearl fell into the hands of the Red Heart Brotherhood."

They drew rein, and Molina surveyed the place closely.

"Have you an idea which way the ruffians went from this spot?" asked the mine-owner.

"I have not, I am sorry to say."

"This is a most admirable chance for an ambush."

"You are right. I had no thought of such a thing until the villains were upon me."

After a few moments, Molina indicated a wish to push on to the cave.

Within a short time, Kelnot said:

"We will stop here, and leave the horses. If one of the kidnappers remains at the cave, the sound of approaching horses would alarm him."

The horses were concealed in the midst of some thick bushes, then they went slowly forward, Kelnot leading. Finally he said:

"You may remain here a few moments, partner, while I go forward and look over the land. There may be snags ahead."

Molina said nothing, and Handy Horace stole forward. He was gone a short time, when he appeared again, a smile of satisfaction on his face, as he softly announced:

"They are all there—three of them. One has his head tied up in a bloody cloth, but as he is kicking, it shows that I did not aim as straight as I supposed. Come on, and move with the utmost caution."

Noislessly they went forward. They did not proceed far before they came to a place where they could peer through a mass of bushes into a hollow, which was directly in front of the mouth of the cave where Pearl had been held a captive.

Three men were lying on the ground in various attitudes of lazy abandon at the bottom of the hollow.

They were Hickory Bill, Posey Pete, and Casper the Spaniard. Bill was smoking, Pete was grumbling, and Casper was resting his dangled head on his hands.

"I tell ye, we're fools to stay round hyer any longer," both Kelnot and Molina heard the bummer say. "Things hev all gone wrong, an' afore we knows it, ther men o' Cimarron'll be hyer wi' a hemp neck-tie for each o' us."

"Dunno but ye'r right," admitted the bully. "Cuss the crooked luck! You two are pretty birds, hain't ye?"

"I don't brag on my beauty," admitted Pete. "This hyer nose o' mine puts me in er hoel."

"And I feel far from looking well," moaned the Spaniard. "My head would like to split, and I have lost enough blood to make me feel very weak."

Then he uttered a string of Spanish curses, all directed toward the one who had wounded him.

"Cas, you villain, you sh'u'd thank yer luck that his aim wassent better, an' thet he didn't putt ther ball through yer head, 'stead erlong ther side o' it," was Hickory Bill's opinion.

"But ye'r fergittin' thet we're in danger every blessed minnit we stops hyer," said Posey Pete. "Ther hull game's gone wrong. Ther boss paid us ter ketch ther gal and hole her till he showed up an' reskyed her—in his mind. We ketched ther gal an' played our part, but thet durned Kelnot got onto ther game somehow an' sailed in. At first I thort 'twas ther boss, an' w'en 'twas too late I saw my mistake. That Kelnot is ther devil ter fight."

"Caramba!" exclaimed Casper. "You knew there was a mistake when it was too late! I knew nothing! That man shot to take life."

"You are shoutin', ole boy," said Hickory Bill. "I know thet man. He does nothin' in er foolin' way."

"But what'll Hustler Harry do now?"

"Durn Hustler Harry! We've got a good slice o' his munny, an' ef we've slipped up on our part o' ther job shell we go fork et over ter him?"

"Nary. Sides thet, ef I understood ther tork we war ter do our level best au' keep ther skids

anyhow. Ef we got ther gal an' turned her ter him, it meant much more."

"Ye'r' right, we've dun our parts an' we're fools ter wait fer him enny longer. We've nothin' ter tell him 'cept that we've lost the gal."

Kelnot placed his lips close to Molina's ear and whispered:

"That Hustler Harry knows already."

"S durned funny he hain't cum nigh us," Posey Pete declared.

"Like you, I think we're fools ter stop hyer longer," said Hickory Bill. "A lynching party frum Cimarron may soon be hyer. Ther gal's in her dad's arm by this time an' Kelnot has spread the yarn all over ther camp—durn 'im!"

The Spaniard now began to show signs of uneasiness.

"I have no desire to hang," he acknowledged.

"So I am for going."

Kelnot touched Molina's arm.

"Come away," he whispered. "Have you not heard enough?"

The mine-owner nodded, and they moved cautiously away. Ten minutes later they were standing beside their horses.

"Which way?" asked Handy Horace.

"Back to Cimarron," replied Martel Molina, with blazing eyes. "I am eager to put the searchers on the hunt."

"Good!" exclaimed the proprietor of the Silver Palace, as he swung into the saddle. "I believe that to be the best possible move. Are you satisfied now concerning this pretended cowboy?"

"He shall be proclaimed an outlaw," declared the mine-owner, his face dark with rage.

CHAPTER XXV.

UNCLE PETER ON THE SEARCH.

UNCLE PETER HODGE sat on a stone beside the body of the dead negro and stared steadily at the heart-shaped mark on his forehead. There was a strange look in the old man's eyes, and the peculiar mark seemed to fascinate him. Although he uttered no words aloud, it was plain that his mind was busy.

Pearl walked slowly away, but the man from Maine did not notice which way she went. Not once did he glance up until she had vanished—fallen into the hands of her foes.

Finally Uncle Peter looked around. He was alone with the dead negro.

The old man betrayed some surprise at Pearl's disappearance, and peered sharply around in search of her.

"Wal, wal!" he muttered.

He thought that the girl had walked away a short distance and would soon return; but when five minutes passed and Pearl did not come back, he began to think that something might be wrong. Lifting his voice, he cried:

"Hey, gal, hello!"

There was no answer, and a light of anxiety crept into Uncle Peter's eyes, and his jovial face became very grave. Once more he called, louder than before:

"Hey there! hey, gal! Where be yeou?"

The result was the same as before and the look of anxiety on the old man's face deepened. He asked himself where she could have gone so suddenly, and, of course, could not answer his own question. He then thought that it would have been impossible for her to have passed beyond the sound of his voice in such a brief space of time.

Again and again he called to her, but she was in truth far beyond the sound of his voice, being carried swiftly away.

When the Girl Avenger returned, she found the man from Maine by the side of the dead negro, but Pearl Molina was gone. In a few words, Uncle Peter told her of the strange disappearance of the mine-owner's daughter.

"I fear that she has again fallen into the hands of her foes," said Ruth, sorrowfully. "Still she may have wandered away in search for her lover. Would that I could remain and hunt for her!"

"Wal, Uncle Peter Hodge, frum Maine, hain't goin' ter skin eout an' leave her. I'll find ther gal if I kin—I will, by golding!"

He seemed very much in earnest, and though Ruth doubted his ability, she bestowed a grateful look upon him.

"You are very kind," she said, "and I hope that you will be successful. I feel that it is my duty to carry poor Joe to his last resting-place."

She had ceased to shed tears, and her face was very hard-set and stern. This second blow from her deadly foe had hardened her heart and made her more determined in her search for vengeance. She would show no womanly weakness now. Nothing should stay her hand when the opportunity to strike came.

Under her direction the body of the faithful old negro was lifted and bound upon the back of one of the horses. When this was done, Uncle Pete assisted her to mount the other. Then she paused and extended her hand to him, looking straight into his eyes, as he grasped her fingers.

"I thank you for what you have done," she said, slowly. "Something tells me that you are a friend—I feel that I am right in the touch of your hand. You have promised to search for Pearl. May God aid you!"

"Amen!" said the old man earnestly.

"You are unused to this rough country," continued the girl. "You may find Pearl in the hands of desperate foes. If you do, you will need to exercise great judgment and possibly boldness in attempting her rescue. Here is a heavy revolver that you may have a chance to use."

The man from Maine grinned a little and shook his head as she held the weapon toward him.

"Guess I do look kinder green," he admitted; "but I hain't fule enuff to travil' without pop-guns."

With these words, he displayed two large self-cocking revolvers.

Ruth looked somewhat surprised.

"You know how to use them?" she asked.

"Wal, I should snicker!" was Uncle Peter's expressive reply.

"That is good!" exclaimed the girl, a stronger light of hope springing into her face. "If the occasion demands, do not hesitate to do so."

"If I do, I guess I'll never kum round to tell yeou 'bout it," he grinned. "I know 'nuff 'bout this kentry to know that it is 'good-by, Eben' if t'other feller shutes fu'st."

With a few more words, they parted, Ruth riding slowly away, leading the animal which bore the dead negro. Uncle Peter watched her till she turned and waved him a parting salute as she disappeared.

When she was gone the old man began to realize that he had a more difficult job on his hands than he had thought. Which way should he move first? This he found an unanswerable question, and so resolved to trust in Providence.

The afternoon was well spent when the Man from Maine met Eric Craddoc. As they were strangers, each found himself gazing at the other over a revolver, for the Down-Easter had jerked forth a weapon as swiftly as Eric could do.

"Wal 'here!" exclaimed the Yankee, with a grin. "If we jest bad sum feller to caount three neow, we c'u'd pop each other over in great style."

"Who are you?" demanded Eric.

"My name's Hodge, with Peter tacked on in front. Sum put uncle ahead ov that an' make it Uncle Peter Hodge. Who be yeou?"

"My name's Craddoc."

This brought no light to the old man's mind, for he had not heard the name from the lips of either Pearl or Ruth.

"Where be yeou frum?"

"From Cimarron. And you?"

"Wal, I belong 'way down in Maine. Guess yeou've heerd tell ov ther place."

The young man surveyed the stranger closely, and mentally decided that he was a new-comer in those parts. Still it was not best to be hasty in giving the unknown a chance to get the drop on him.

"How came you here?" asked Eric.

Uncle Peter broke into a laugh, which seemed to shake him from head to foot. When he regained his usual composure, he said:

"By gum! young feller, yeou've got more gall'n Jed Babb's boy Ike ever had, an' thet Ike was allus axin' questions. Heow did I cum heer? Wal, wal! I didn't foot it ther hull ov ther way. Guess yeou think I'm er tramp. Hey?"

"I more than half believe that you have escaped from some lunatic asylum," was the reply.

"Sho! Ye don't mean that!"

Uncle Peter seemed actually surprised.

"I've bin took fer most everythin'," he said, with a sober shake of his head, "but never fer er blanked idjot afore. By thutteration! Yeou've got ter fight to pay fer that!"

Deliberately the man from Maine lowered his revolver and returned the weapon to his pocket. Then he began to slowly take off his coat, which he threw down on the ground. He next expectorated on his hands and advanced toward the young man, vigorously rubbing the palms together.

Eric had viewed this performance with some surprise and amusement, but he now began to realize that the man from Maine was in dead earnest. He meant to fight.

"Hold on! hold on!" he cried. "I don't want to fight."

But Uncle Peter continued to advance.

"Wal, I do," he declared. "I hain't took a han' in a good square stan' up an' punch fur fifteen yeers, but w'en er man calls me a loon-etic or an idjot—wal, then I'm goin' ter fight!"

Eric could scarcely restrain his amusement. He now had little doubt but Uncle Peter was what he claimed to be—a stranger in those parts, lately from the State of Maine.

"Wait!" he cried. "I will apologize."

Uncle Peter paused doubtfully and shook his head.

"Don't yeou do it," he advised. "Thet'd spoil all ther fun. I'd reely like to try ye a little whirl, jest to see if the ole man's gittin' so old that he hain't able to take keer ov hisself. I used to lick Bill Jones w'en I was a boy, an' more'n once I've walloppe Big Seth Smith. Say, stranger, let's see which is ther best feller?"

But Eric had no desire to fight with the strange old fellow from Maine.

"No," he said, positively. "I have no time

to waste in such a ridiculous way. If I have offended you in any way I ask your pardon."

"Wal, I bain't ther feller to force a chap inter anythin' arter he's axed my parding, so we'll call it square an' shake flappers."

The man from Maine extended his hand, which was warmly grasped by Eric, who had begun to like the queer old fellow.

After they had shaken hands Uncle Peter went back and picked up his coat.

"I guess yeou hain't seen no gal anywhere round these parts, hav' ye?" he ventured.

Eric cast a swift glance of suspicion at him.

"A girl?" he exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"Wal, I'm lookin' fer a gal, an' I didn't know but yeou might hav' seen her."

"Describe her."

In his own peculiar way the man from Maine did so. As he proceeded Eric became more and more excited. Finally the young man strode forward and caught Uncle Peter by the shoulder.

"You have seen her!" he cried. "Where—when?"

Uncle Peter seemed to catch the truth in an instant.

"Yeou are her lover," he said.

"Where have you seen her?" repeated Eric.

"Where is she now?"

"I wish I c'u'd tell yeou."

"Well, tell me what you know as briefly as possible."

The Yankee did so, and when he had finished, Eric uttered a groan.

"The chances are that she has again fallen into the hands of that treacherous cowboy's hired tools," he declared.

"Who ye torkin' 'bout? Not ther feller w'at calls hisself Hustler Harry?"

"The very one. Do you know anything of him?"

"Wal, not much."

Then the man from Maine told of what he had overheard on his arrival in Cimarron and of the subsequent events in the Silver Palace Saloon.

"He's er rip-staver to fight," asserted Uncle Peter, with a grin.

"But a perfect snake in the grass," said Eric. "I have found him out. He is a thoroughly evil man."

With a few words, he then told the Yankee what he knew of the Man from High Notch and what he suspected.

"After I met the ruffian, Hickory Bill," continued the young man, "I returned to the spot where we had left our horses and agreed to meet. The horses were both gone. The treacherous dog had been there before me. Since that time I have been searching for him, but with little hope of being successful."

There was a strange look on Uncle Pete's face as he slowly said:

"I'm kinder sorry that this 'ere feller's turnin' out to be sech a scamp, an' I'm ready to do all I kin to help ye find ther leetle gal. There's one thing that kinder puzzles my ole head. If this 'ere cowboy's in with the three tuff critters who kerried off the gal, what was they layin' a job to fix him for? They are ther ones, for I heerd the hull busness."

"Hustler Harry, as he calls himself, has bought their services since they kidnapped Pearl. These fellows will do anything for money."

"Thet must be ther way ov it," acknowledged the Yankee. "Wal, my boy, yeou kin count on yer Uncle Peter to stan' by ye. I'm ready to do all I kin to help find ther gal."

"For which I thank you," said Eric, as he again extended his hand. "Something tells me that you are not a friend to be despised."

"Thankee, thankee," mumbled the Down-Easter, with his habitual grin.

During the rest of the afternoon the two new-made friends kept together until near dark. Uncle Peter finally attempted to persuade Eric to return to Cimarron and gather a band of searchers. But the young man would not do so.

"Look here," he said, suddenly, "The best way to do this is for you to return to the camp and spread the news. Tell what you have seen and get together a party with as little loss of time as possible and return to this vicinity. If you are too long, the ruffians may get word from camp and vacate these parts. If you move rapidly, they will have no chance to do so. Do you understand?"

"Wal, I guess! I'm jest the feller fer that leetle job. Depen' on it, I'll be back with a mess ov fellers by mornin' or afore. We'll turn these 'ere hills t'other end uppards but we'll find that leetle gal—we will, by golding!"

"As for me," added Eric, "I cannot go away from here while I think there is the least chance of finding Pearl. Perhaps, if I did, I might miss a chance to rescue her."

"That's so, that's so," admitted the Yankee.

"Guess I know pretty much haow yeou feel. I've been there. My fu'st wife was a stunner an' jest broke me all up afore we was hitched. Arterward she broke me in a diff'rent way. But never mind that. I'll tell ye all 'bout it sum other time. Look out for yer Uncle Peter 'bout sun-up."

With a few words more, they separated, the man from Maine turning toward the camp.

Uncle Peter walked briskly along, and did not hesitate in the least about the course to pursue. He seemed to possess a pretty accurate idea of the proper direction to follow in order to reach Cimarron City.

Darkness came on rapidly.

Suddenly the man from Maine leaped swiftly into the bushes near at hand and listened.

He thought he heard a cry for help.

Pushing swiftly forward through the bushes, he soon came to the brink of a shallow defile. There he halted and listened again.

Plainly he heard the sounds of many horses advancing at a gallop. A moment later six or eight dark forms seemed to ride out of the shadows. Almost before he could catch a swift breath they were passing beneath him.

In his arms one of the riders seemed to be carrying a human form.

"Help! Heaven save me!"

Plainly the man from Maine heard that cry and he recognized the voice as that of the girl who had so mysteriously disappeared.

"Curse it! Can't you keep her still?" growled one of the horsemen.

Then the entire band with their prisoner swept on into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXVI.

INTO A TERRIBLE TRAP.

ONLY for an instant did the man from Maine hesitate about his next move. At first the thought that he had better return and tell Eric Craddoc of what he had discovered flashed through his mind. In a moment he knew that such a movement would but waste time. The chance of finding the young man would be one in a hundred. No, he must follow the horsemen who were bearing Pearl away.

Down into the defile he dashed, at the risk of falling headlong and breaking his neck.

"Must do it!" he gritted, as he set his teeth, threw back his head and broke into a run, following the vanished riders.

Now no one would have thought Uncle Peter Hodge capable of running far or fast. Almost any one would have been amazed to have seen him go racing along the defile through the gathering gloom, head up, lips closed, hands lifted and clinched on his breast. The attitude and action were those of a professional runner. Evidently Uncle Peter had "bin thar" before.

And as he ran his mind was not idle.

Who were the horsemen?

Uncle Peter asked himself the question, and for a time was unable to answer it. Finally a thought flashed through his mind.

"The Brothers of the Red Heart!"

What did Uncle Peter Hodge, from Maine, know of the Brothers of the Red Heart? It was evident that he knew something.

On he ran until the sounds of iron-shod hoofs could be plainly heard. The riders had slackened their pace.

A sigh of satisfaction came from the pursuer's lips as he, too, began to slow up.

But if the band was indeed the Brothers of the Red Heart, as he felt convinced that it was, what was the need of pursuing them so closely? He knew where their secret cavern was located, and it was probable that they were carrying the captive there.

He could not hope to follow them closely through the darkness if they urged their horses forward at their utmost speed. If they did not hurry, he might be able to do so.

On through the gloom went pursued and pursuer. The latter was favored, for as the darkness increased, the horsemen ceased to urge their animals forward so swiftly.

It was a long, tiresome tramp for the man on foot, but he appeared to stand it remarkably well, for he showed no signs of flagging.

Finally, within a little more than a mile of Cimarron, the horsemen halted and held a hurried consultation. The trailer was unable to creep near enough to hear their words.

After a few moments they separated. Two of them, however, rode directly forward. When it was safe to do so, the man from Maine followed.

Within a minute's time he found himself in the stage road, and listening sharply, heard the receding sound of galloping horses in the direction of Cimarron.

Once more he broke into a run, but he did not overtake the horsemen.

Within a remarkably brief space of time, Uncle Peter found himself lying close to the wall of the cabin against the cliff, within sight of the lights of Cimarron City.

The low hum of voices came to his ears, but as the speakers were conversing in low tones, he could not distinguish what they were saying:

With little difficulty, he found the crack in the wall and peered into the hut. He saw the old blind woman sitting in a chair, but could not distinguish the persons whose voices he could hear.

For a long time he remained with his eye glued to the tiny crack. After five or ten minutes, two men crossed the cabin floor, opened the door in the rear partition and disappeared.

Still the spy remained at his post.

Slowly the minutes dragged by and still silence reigned within the cabin. Finally the blind woman began to sway back and forth and sing a low, plaintive song.

Uncle Peter began to grow restless.

Finally the thought came to him that possibly he might be able to rescue Pearl by a bold move. The chance was that but two or, at most, three of the Brothers of the Red Heart were in the cave. He had contended against greater odds many times and come off the victor.

Quietly the man from Maine arose to his feet and advanced to the cabin door. An instant he hesitated, then gave the secret rap of the Brotherhood.

The low crooning ceased and a soft, shuffling, uncertain step approached the door.

"Who is there?"

Without hesitation the strange Yankee rapped nine times.

Then the door was cautiously opened and he slipped quickly into the room. He heard the sound as the old blind woman fastened the door behind him, but without uttering another word, he advanced toward the back door.

When he was in the very center of the room, the door opened and two bearded fellows strode into the room.

Uncle Peter was detected!

"Hello! Holy Moses! Who's this?" demanded one of the men.

Uncle Peter's hand was on a revolver concealed in a convenient pocket, but he resolved to try strategy, although he knew that the chances were that such an attempt would not deceive the fellows.

"My name's Hodge," he grinned, in an easy, indifferent way—"Uncle Peter Hodge, from Maine. Happy to make your acquaintance."

"Uncle Peter Nothing!" sneered the fellow, as he surveyed the man from Maine closely.

"No, no," corrected the Down-Easter; "Hodge. That's my name—Hodge."

"What are you in here for?"

"What? Ho! In here? W'y I jest dropped in to see if yeou folks know anything ov a Jinkins—Jonathan Jinkins. Ye see he's my wife's—"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"What? Hey? Cheese? Wal, speakin' ov cheese, my oldest darter, Medusa, kin make ther lappin' good cheese. No gittin' round that, I tell yeou! She's er harker, I snum to goodness!"

"You are a spy," declared the man.

"No, I hain't; I'm a farmer when I'm to bum, by thutteration—Drop that! Hands up or I'll bore you both!"

Sharp and clear these last words shot from the lips of the "Yankee," and strangely enough, there was not a trace of the usual drawl in his voice. The grin left his face and a hard, stern look took its place. There was a deadly glitter in the eyes which looked along the barrel of his revolver, that had leaped into view.

Both of the men recoiled a step. One of them had been reaching for a revolver, but his move had been frustrated by the alertness of the pseudo-Yankee.

"The devil!" hissed one of them.

"Not exactly," said the other; "but if I am not mistaken, about as bad."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that that mock Yankee is none other than Old Dan Shark, the detective!"

A cry of amazement came from the lips of the other.

"Blazes!" he exclaimed. "I believe you are right!"

"I know I am," was the reply.

The man with the revolver laughed, coolly.

"I reckon the character of Uncle Peter Hodge is about played," he observed. "This closes the deal and lets Uncle Peter out. But in his place Dan Shark bobs up serenely."

"You never shall leave this room alive!" hissed one of the men.

The detective smiled indifferently.

"Do you think so? Well, now, pards, it looks as if you fellows would furnish subjects for a funeral long before I do. If I do not salt you within the next five minutes, you are pretty sure to hang within the next five years. But I—"

His words were cut short by a terrific blow on the side of his head and he was knocked to the floor. He had anticipated no danger from the blind woman, but she had struck him down with a chair, the sound of his voice telling her where to deliver the blow.

Before he could rise, both of the men hurled themselves upon him.

A desperate struggle ensued.

Dan Shark was not only a powerful man, but he was quick and active.

Here and there over the cabin floor went the three men, panting, gasping and struggling in silence—a terribly unequal battle.

Old Shark was fighting for his life, for he felt that he need expect little mercy if captured by the desperado Brotherhood.

With her hands still grasping the lowered chair, the blind woman listened eagerly to the sounds of the combat.

"He fights like a tiger!" she muttered.

"Give him the knife, Tom!" gasped one of the men. "We can't handle him."

"Yes, we can," gritted the other. "I have him by the throat."

He spoke the truth. Old Shark's struggles were something wonderful to see, but gradually they grew fainter and fainter. A bloody mist swam before his eyes, there was a ringing in his ears—everything was growing dark.

"Let up, Tom; he's fixed."

He just heard the words; they seemed to be spoken at a distance.

When the detective recovered sufficiently to notice things around him, he found himself bound securely hand and foot and a gag in his mouth. The two men were standing on either side of him. One of them stirred him with a heavy foot, and said:

"Well, old fellow, how do you feel?"

"Oh, he's too stuck up to answer *you*," laughed the other.

"Well, he's a cuss to handle."

"You bet."

"I thought he'd get the best of us one time."

"Well, I didn't know but he would."

"Reckon this will be his last skirmish."

"The Brotherhood shall pronounce his doom."

"We had better put on a blindfold before we take him in."

"I don't hardly think it necessary, for it is not at all probable that he will ever come out alive."

Had he been able to do so, Old Shark could have told them that such trouble was unnecessary, as he had been there before.

They finally decided to use the blindfold, and after it was adjusted, he was raised and borne into the secret cave of the Red Heart Brotherhood.

Would he ever come out alive?

CHAPTER XXVII.

PROCLAIMED AN OUTLAW.

MARTEL MOLINA meant what he said when he declared that Hustler Harry should be proclaimed an outlaw.

Back toward Cimarron City rode the mine-owner and Horace Kelnot. For a time the latter was silent. Finally, he said:

"There seems to be little chance of mistake in this matter. What we have just heard seems proof conclusive of the fellow's guilt."

"Proof enough to convict him before a jury," burst from Molina's lips. "I shall proclaim him an outlaw myself and take the consequences. It was a most fortunate thing that led us to the spot where we overheard those ruffians."

"You are right. I shall direct the searchers to capture those three men. We might have done that ourselves."

"We had no time to waste with them. It is of the greatest importance now that we get back to the camp at once and put out the searchers."

"Again you are right. Every moment lost now counts against us. At last we know just who to strike. If we only knew just where to find our game we would end this affair right soon."

For a minute or more the mine-owner said nothing further, but rode with bowed head, thinking deeply. When he glanced up there was a hard, unpleasant look on his face.

"There is little doubt in my mind but that this fellow who calls himself Eric Craddoc is an accomplice of the pretended cowboy," he said.

Kelnot shook his head, soberly.

"He may be, but we have no proof that he is. I would not be too hasty in condemning him if I were you."

The mine-owner looked at Handy Horace queerly for a moment.

"You are a peculiar man," he said. "I believe that you are inclined to be too generous. Most men in your place would gladly seize the opportunity to crush a rival."

Handy Horace looked confused for a moment, then turned and gazed straight into Molina's face, as he said:

"I have no desire to unjustly accuse any one, even though he may be my bitterest foe. If I was sure that this young man was in league with the treacherous cowboy, I would be willing enough to do anything that I could to bring him to justice. I do not say that Craddoc is not an accomplice of Hustler Harry, but as yet we have no proof. It will pay us to direct our energies for the present against the one whom we know to be the chief villain of the lot."

"Your words convince me that in this emergency I can rely on your sound judgment. From this time forward I shall make it a point to consult you upon any important move that I may contemplate making in this matter."

"You flatter me," declared Kelnot. "But I assure you, if you do so I shall advise you to the best of my ability. I am not infallible, however."

Molina checked him with a gesture.

"Enough. No man is infallible. But let us make greater haste in reaching Cimarron. I cannot forget for an instant that my darling daughter is a captive."

Neither horse was spared by its rider, and when the two men came in sight of Cimarron, the animals were flecked with foam. As they dashed into the camp, Kelnot said:

"You go on to your home. I will get the boys to moving with as little delay as possible, and will report to you if there is anything of importance to tell."

To this the mine-owner consented, for, to tell the truth, he had kept in the saddle with the greatest difficulty during the time that they had passed over the last mile. His head throbbed with an intense pain, and at times everything seemed whirling around.

"I fear I am ill," he muttered. "Come to me as soon as there is any news."

A look of alarm appeared on Kelnot's face.

"Perhaps I had better see you safely to the house. You may not have strength enough—"

Molina set his teeth and straightened up in the saddle.

"No, no!" he said hoarsely. "I am all right. Send out the searchers. Never mind me. Don't lose time! Every moment is precious."

There was quite a throng in front of the Silver Palace, and the appearance of the two men was greeted with a shout.

"The boys are ready," smiled Handy Horace.

They separated, Kelnot reining up in front of the hotel, and Molina continuing toward his residence. When he reached the door, he had barely sufficient strength to dismount and stagger into the house, leaving the horse where he stood.

The mine-owner flung himself on the sofa, and for a time, nearly lost consciousness. When he recovered, he found the woman-servant at his side.

"Can I do anything for you?" she asked.

Molina told her where to find some liquor, and when she brought it, he took a liberal draught.

"There is nothing more that you can do at present," he said. "Leave me alone for a time."

She complied with his request, and the unfortunate man was left to curse his luck and groan. He took frequent pulls at the flask of liquor, and as his headache became less acute, he sunk into a doze.

When Horace Kelnot appeared, he found the mine-owner fast asleep. Carefully he stole from the room and sought the woman whom he had placed in the house. They held a long consultation.

Nearly an hour had passed when the proprietor of the Silver Palace returned to Molina's side. The sleeping man was aroused by a word. He started up as he saw Kelnot by his side.

"Away, you villain!" he shouted wildly. "You have stolen my daughter and would murder me! Away, or I will—"

He paused and put one hand to his head in a puzzled way.

Handy Horace appeared alarmed.

"What do you mean?" he gasped.

Molina uttered a groan and gazed straight at him for several seconds. At last he said:

"It was only a dream, for which I thank God! Sit down, Kelnot."

With a breath of relief, Kelnot sank into a chair.

"You startled me!" he declared. "You looked so wild at first that I thought you must be having another crazy spell."

"It was a horrible dream. It has been years since I have dreamed anything that affected me so."

"What did you dream?"

Molina shuddered.

"I don't care to think of it. You were the cause of all my trouble. Instead of being a friend, you were a treacherous foe. Pearl was in your power, and just as you awoke me, I thought you had advanced to my side with a knife in your hand, intending to murder me."

Handy Horace was quite pale when Molina ceased to speak.

"A bad dream, indeed," he observed, his voice sounding choked and unnatural.

Molina threw out one hand as if to banish all thoughts of the dream. He fixed his eyes inquiringly on Kelnot's face, hoping to read some tidings there, even before he asked a question.

"What news do you bring?"

"None, I am sorry to say, except that the searchers have been sent out. I am going to join them soon, but I resolved to see you ere I did so."

"Is this young Craddoc in town?"

"No. I have tried to find him, but he is not here."

Molina sprung up and walked the floor, his hands tightly gripped behind his back. Finally he wheeled on Kelnot.

"I tell you that fellow is a scoundrel!" he cried. "I am sure of it!"

"You may be right," admitted Handy Horace; "but still I say we have no proof of it."

"Where is he—where is the rascal? If he is an honest man, why does he not show his nose and give an account of himself. I tell you, Kelnot, you are inclined to be too easy with the fellow."

Handy Horace smiled and shook his head.

"Possibly; but we have other game that we have spotted. When are you going to post that proclamation?"

"As soon as possible. I will write it at once. No time should be wasted."

He seized a pen and paper, and sitting down at his desk, wrote rapidly for a few minutes. When he had finished he handed the writing to Kelnot, and instructed him to have half a dozen copies made and posted in conspicuous places.

An hour later the citizens of Cimarron City were reading the following:

PROCLAMATION!

"I, Martel Molina, a citizen of the town of Cimarron, do hereby proclaim a certain professed cowboy, who gives his name as Hustler Harry, to be a desperado and an outlaw. I have sufficient proof to sustain this charge, and offer a

REWARD OF \$1,000

for his capture alive. The sum to be paid promptly upon his delivery into the hands of Boss Kayford, the marshal. Double the above sum will be paid for the restoration, unharmed, of my daughter, Pearl, who is believed to be in Hustler Harry's power.

"[Signed,] MARTEL MOLINA."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE COWBOY'S BOLDNESS.

Boss KAYFORD was a large, muscular man, who declared that never had he been "worsted" in a fair fight. It was noticed, however, that he carefully avoided any trouble with Hickory Bill, the boasted chief of Cimarron.

Just how Kayford came to be appointed marshal of the camp it would be difficult to explain. There were those who hinted that he had obtained the position by underhand means, but no one dared express such an opinion openly.

Kayford was a man who could easily be bought, and it was almost as often that he "stood in" with crime as defended justice.

Kelnot and the marshal were on friendly terms, and when the former placed a certain paper in Kayford's hands, with instructions to serve it on sight, the marshal said:

"Depen' on it, boss. I'm yours t' command."

The paper was a warrant for the arrest of Hustler Harry, charging him with various crimes, and sworn out by Martel Molina at the instigation of Handy Horace.

The bulletins proclaiming the cowboy an outlaw had created great excitement in the camp. The news spread like wildfire. The rewards offered stimulated those who started out on the hunt to do their level best, but little the most of them dreamed how near the girl for whom they searched was to the camp of Cimarron.

The day passed swiftly and the shadows of night began to gather. Still nothing had been found to indicate that any of the searchers were within miles of the cowboy or maiden.

Just at dusk a man strode into the room where Martel Molina was reclining upon the sofa. The mine-owner started up and saw before him—

Hustler Harry!

A lamp had not been lighted in the room, but as the Man from High Notch was between Molina and the window, the latter recognized him at once.

Molina gave utterance to an exclamation of genuine amazement.

"Evenin', boss," saluted Harry, easily. "Thort I'd drap in an' see ye."

"You bold villain!" cried Molina, as he leaped toward the cool cowboy. "You are my prisoner!"

With a light laugh, the Man from High Notch caught both of Molina's wrists, brought them together and confined them with one hand, seized him by the collar with the other, and lifting him clear of the floor, kicked out his feet and sat him down upon the sofa.

"'Scuse this uncromomeous manner of treatin' ye," begged the cowboy. "But it's sometimes necessary ter act a leetle more harshly than usual. I kem in ter tork with ye, not ter rassil."

Molina was amazed. What manner of man was this? He had handled the mine-owner as easily as if he were a child.

"I shall call for help," panted the excited man, as soon as he could catch his breath.

"Oh, no you won't," said the Man from High Notch, quite confidently. "I reckon youhev er leetle boss sense. I'm loaded down with big guns, an' it might prove mighty onhealthy fur ye ter squawk. Use judgment, man. Don't be hasty."

"If I call for aid you cannot escape."

"Now don't attemp' ter fool yerself in that way. I'd be shore ter git plum' erway, an' them as found ye w'u'd hev ter dig lead outen ye 'fore they c'u'd b'ist ye inter a coffing."

"What do you want?"

The cowboy laughed, as he relaxed his hold on the mine-owner's collar and flung himself into a chair near at hand.

"Thar, now yer beginnin' ter tork business," he declared. "Jest keep yer clothes on an' not go ter callin' in ther naybors an' we'll hev er right social leetle chat. I didn't drap in here fer northin'—don't you think it?"

"But this is not stating your business. Come to the point at once, you villain!"

"Now see here, boss, can't ye use a leetle softer cog than that? I'm dreadfully fond of pet names, but that thar don't jest strike me whar I live. Call me sum'thin' a trifle softer, please."

His quiet words seemed to enrage Molina. The mine-owner started up, fairly trembling with fury, as he cried:

"You miserable cur! Where is my daughter? Where is she, I say? Tell me, or I'll—"

He never told what he would do. The cowboy arose and again seized the excited man and placed him on the sofa. He held him there, as he said, sternly:

"Drop this foolin', boss, an' cum ter yer senses. Don't git so tore out. Yer gal-wal, thet's jest w'at I cum hyer ter speak with ye 'bout."

"You have come to demand a ransom," gasped Molina. "You devil! I swear I'll never—"

"Now don't be too hasty, old man. I s'pose ye'd be fool ernuff ter let yer darter die in despair afore ye'd fork over fifty thousan'?"

"Fifty thousand!" repeated the tortured and excited father. "Is that your price?"

"No, 'tain't, old man; ye've made a plum' fool of yerself if you think I know whar the gal is. If I did, I'd bring her back ter ye; not fer your sake, but fer hern. As fer you, ye don't know yer best fr'en's."

"You lie! lie!" cried Molina. "You have Pearl in your power. I know it—have proof of it! Let me tell you that if she is not restored to me within ten hours, you shall hang!"

"It's allus ketchin' afore hangin'," said Harry, grimly, "an' I'm er mighty hard fleeter ketch. Jest ther same, I don't fancy bein' branded as an outlaw. I promise you, pard, that ye shell yet be ashamed of that leetle job. It is plain ter me that ye don't know who yer frien's are. I'm no more an outlaw than you are, yerself, an' you'll find it out so."

"Of course you will deny it, but I have the proof. Where have you been since yesterday?"

"Chasin' a hoss-thief," was the prompt reply. "A cuss stole my critter, an' that of Pard Craddoc. I struck his trail an' run him clean to Red Nose Gap—an' I got ther critters. Ther durned thief skipped me."

There was every appearance of sincerity about the cowboy's words, yet Molina did not believe him.

"A pretty tale!" he sneered. "It doesn't go down just the same."

"But I kin prove that I was in Red Nose Gap this mornin'."

"That will not clear you. We have sufficient evidence from the lips of the tools whom you hired to do your dirty work to doubly convict you."

"Tools—w'at tools? W'at yer drivin' at?"

"You know well enough what I mean. The three ruffians whom you hired were overheard talking of you. They unconsciously gave the whole foul game away."

Harry seemed nonplussed.

"Ye can't mean Hick'ry Bill an' his pals?"

"But those are the very ones that I do mean. If they are captured, they will be forced to testify against you."

"Who heard 'em say that I hired 'em?"

"I did."

For a few moments the cowboy was silent. He seemed puzzled, but the shadows prevented Martel Molina from studying his face.

"I reckon that things do look kinder bad," he admitted, after a time. "Thet is w'at I kem hyer fer, ter find out jest w'at ther evidence ag'in' me 'mounted ter."

"There is evidence enough."

"P'raps ye'r right, but 'pearances are mighty deceptive. I'm goin' ter prove ter ye that I hain't ther galoot w'at yer takes me fer. You shell hear frum me ergin. Jest now it's gittin' dark, an' thar hain't no light in this hyer room. I don't reckon it would be right healthy fer me ter stop roun' much longer, so I'll slope. Jest you keep yer settin' an' remember that I've got a gun out, an' lookin' at ye."

For the first time the cowboy displayed a revolver. He backed slowly toward the door, keeping Molina covered all the time. Reaching round behind him, he took hold of the knob and opened the door.

"Day-day, partner," he laughed, and sprung backward through the doorway, closing the door behind him.

Until that moment Molina had been awed by his boldness. As the door slammed, the mine-owner leaped to his feet with a furious oath and sprung forward in pursuit. In his excitement, he was unable to open the door for a moment, and as he did so, the outer door closed with a bang.

"He isn't out of the net yet!" gritted the mine-owner, as he rushed along the hallway, revolver in hand.

A moment later, he was standing in front of the house peering sharply into the darkness on either hand.

There was no one in sight.

Swiftly lifting the revolver, he discharged,

five shots in rapid succession, firing straight up into the air.

The effect was almost magical.

Within a minute's time he was surrounded by a score of fellows, all eager to know what the trouble was. As briefly as possible he told them, and in a remarkably short space of time the searchers were scouring the place for the man who had been branded as an outlaw.

Among those who were aroused by the pistol-shots was Horace Kelnot, who had just returned to camp with a party of unsuccessful searchers. Noticing that the shots were fired in the vicinity of Molina's residence, he at once made his way in that direction. He came upon the excited mine-owner just as Molina sent the last man of the crowd skurrying away on the hunt.

"What is the trouble?" asked the proprietor of the Silver Palace, as he came up.

"Hello, Kelnot," cried Molina. "I am glad to see you just now. The man you have been hunting for was here not more than three minutes ago."

"What? Not Hustler Harry?"

"That is the one I mean. By Jupiter! the fellow was bold enough to enter my house."

Handy Horace was amazed.

"You are sure?"

"Sure! Well I should say so! He came into the room where I was and made himself quite at home. He handled me as if I were a child and made me listen to his lies."

"What did he have to say?"

"Not a word of truth, I will guarantee. He denied everything."

"Of course. But how did the fellow escape?"

"Held me covered and backed from the room. He reached the street only a moment in advance of me, yet when I came out he had vanished."

"He shall be captured!" cried Kelnot. "By heavens! I will turn this town into a perfect hornets' nest! He shall not escape!"

Then he turned and dashed swiftly from the street, a revolver in each hand, firing at every jump.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DESPERATE MAN'S DARING.

KELNOT did in truth turn the town into a "hornets' nest," but for all of that, Hustler Harry was not captured. After two hours of searching, the men began to tire and give up the hunt. Kelnot raved and fumed, but he only wasted his breath.

The men of the camp gathered in the saloons and discussed the recent exciting events. Within the last forty-eight hours the town had witnessed more excitement than ever before during its short life.

Hustler Harry was a stranger in Cimarron and therefore had no friends in the place. Since his appearance in the camp, events had conspired to place him in a very bad light. Molina and Kelnot were two of the most influential men in the town, and when they pronounced against a man, the majority of the citizens rose up and denounced him.

But if Hustler Harry had no friends, Molina and Kelnot had enemies. Molina's foes, the greater part of them, were rough fellows who had once been in his employ and lost their positions through their own negligence or recklessness. He had one or two foes who had met defeat at his hands in certain battles over mining property. Kelnot's enemies were of two classes. There were honest, respectable men who distrusted the proprietor of the Silver Palace, and he was also disliked by many of the rougher class. But no one was bold enough to express his dislike openly.

Despite the fact that Kelnot had told Molina that he should instruct the searchers to capture Hickory Bill and his companions, he did not do so. Hickory Bill or Casper did not venture to appear in Cimarron, but during the evening the old toper, Posey Pete, stole slyly into the Silver Palace.

The crowd was eagerly discussing the recent exciting events, and Pete's entrance was not noticed. With a cat-like step, the old bummer approached the bar, and laying down a piece of money, called for liquor.

The barkeeper glanced at the money in amazement. It was a most astonishing thing for the old toper to have anything with which to pay for a drink. He usually beat his drinks out of whoever he could.

Pete noticed the barkeeper's look of amazement, and hastened to say:

"Oh, it's good, ole fel. No lead 'bout that."

"That's all right; but where did you get it?"

The bummer drew himself up as if he felt his dignity insulted.

"Don't reckon I've got ter 'count ter you fer every cent I git," he observed, stiffly. "It's thar, hain't it?"

"It appears to be."

"Wal, set out ther forty-rod."

With an amused laugh, the dispenser of liquid refreshments complied. Pete seized the glass and bottle, and as he turned out the liquor, observed:

"Never mind ther change. I'll take it out in this hyer."

When he had satisfied his thirst, he mingled with the crowd. On every hand he heard the men talking of the kidnapped girl and her supposed abductor. Pete listened closely to this talk, and soon noticed that no one mentioned his name or that of his comrades in connection with this job.

"He's kep' his word," muttered the bummer, "though I don't see how he dun it. Reckon thar hain't no need fer Bill an' Cas ter lay low. Nobody w'u'd jump at 'em ef they showed up."

But the absence of the three men from town had been noticed despite the excitement, and the bummer was spotted as soon as he appeared in the saloon. There were one or two of the lynx-eyed men of Cimarron who thought and reasoned for themselves, and they were not ready to accept everything as truth that was mouthed by the multitude. One of these followed Posey Pete as he sauntered here and there through the crowd.

Handy Horace was not present. He had gone to report to Molina the failure of the search.

Posey Hete listened eagerly to the variety of opinions expressed by the crowd, and his face showed no sign of satisfaction or dismay at what he heard. The man who was shadowing him seemed disappointed at this.

"I may be 'way off," he muttered to himself. "That old bum has not the sand to enter upon any such a desperate game himself, nor the brains to devise a plan of action; but Hickory Bill or the Spaniard has pluck enough and some to spare. The bummer was in with them if he had a hand in it at all. But there is a guiding power back of the three, and that is where this fellow's money came from. Perhaps this accursed cowboy is the hidden power; perhaps not."

Posey Pete had not been in the saloon more than thirty minutes when the door opened and a large, roughly-dressed man, whose features were concealed by a mass of red whiskers, entered. His hat was pulled low down over his eyes, so that but a glimpse of them could be obtained. The man appeared to be a stranger in the place.

Into the room strode the stranger glancing sharply around. His entrance attracted little attention! Although the new-comer appeared like a person who would not refuse a drink, he did not approach the bar.

The red-bearded man soon seemed to be attracted by the loud talk of a fellow who was surrounded by a throng of listeners. The stranger approached the crowd and listened in a manner which seemed to indicate he was not interested very much.

The orator in the center of the throng was denouncing Hustler Harry in round terms.

"W'y, feller-citizens," he cried, "thet thar galoot waz kicked out o' Slab City fur stealin' ole close not more'n three months ergo."

"How d'y'e know that, Joe?" asked one.

"Know it?" repeated the speaker, casting a scornful look toward the questioner. "How do I know ennythin' a tall? Didn't I cum frum Slab City ter this hyer burgh? Didn't I see ther durned cow-puncher kicked out merself?"

"Thort you sed this mornin' that ye never sot eyes onto him afore t'other night?"

"Did I? Wull, I must 'a' plum' fergot. Reckon I took too much stomach 'ile arter breakfast."

The red-bearded man surveyed the speaker closely as if he desired to know him when they met again, then he walked slowly away from the little knot.

Here and there in various parts of the room men were talking together, and the subject of their conversation was almost invariably Hustler Harry. On every hand he heard the most complimentary remarks made about the strange cowboy.

Finally the red-bearded man paused in front of the bulletin which proclaimed Hustler Harry an outlaw and offered a reward for his capture. Slowly, word by word, the stranger seemed to spell out the lettering on the large sheet of paper, picking his teeth carelessly with a big knife, which he had drawn from his sheath at his belt.

"W'at'd' ye think o' it, pard?"

It was Posey Pete's voice, and as he asked the question the bummer brought his hand down vigorously on the shoulder of the stranger. In some way the bummer's fingers caught in that red-beard, and lo! it was jerked from the large man's face. The next instant he whirled and knocked Posey Pete twice his length.

"Hustler Harry!"

The cry went up from two scores of throats. The cowboy was before them!

With a cool, half-scornful smile on his face, the Man from High Notch bowed mockingly.

"Thet's my handle," he acknowledged, his voice cool and even. "I'm hyer, big as life an' twice as nateral."

Posey Pete scrambled to his feet, rubbing his head, and muttering:

"Durn 'tall, pard; w'at fur ye want ter do thet, now?"

For a moment the crowd seemed spell-bound with amazement. Hustler Harry improved the chance to speak.

"I jest thort I'd cum in, so I jest come in," he explained, with a smile. "Heard thet you galoots was lookin' right sharp fur me, an' so I called round. Sum of ye nev mighty poor 'pinion of me, I reckon; an' heer ahind me is a dockymen w'at says I'm a cuss of low degree. Hyer's my compliments ter that!"

With remarkable swiftness, he whirled and drove the knife which he held into the very center of the proclamation. The next instant he was facing the crowd again, and he held a heavy revolver in either hand.

"Easy, pard," he admonished. "I kin shoot quicker'n a cat kin wink, an' I shell do it if I hev ter. Thar won't be no talky-talk afore I shoot, nuther. W'en I begin ter sling lead thar 'll be a blood-red haze all over ther room. My name's Hustler Harry, an' I'm er mighty Hard Nut ter Crack."

It was plain that the Man from High Notch was not in a trifling mood, and for a time the entire crowd was awed into inactivity. The cowboy laughed softly as he noted this, but all the while his keen eyes were peering sharply around in search for some avenue of escape. He saw nothing but a distant window, and the open door beyond the crowd. It seemed as if he was trapped.

Suddenly one of the crowd started forward, crying sharply:

"Surrender, you villain!"

In an instant, one of Harry's revolvers was turned upon him.

"Whoa up!" commanded the Man from High Notch. "Go a leetle slow, pard, if ye don't want ter run ag'in' lead. I hain't surrenderin' this eve, my posey!"

"Whar's the marshal?" asked some one.

"Hyer," was the reply, as Boss Kayford came forward. "Reckon I'm ther man t' harness this hoss. Throw down yer guns, sonny."

Hustler Harry laughed softly as he brought one of the revolvers to bear fairly at Kayford's breast.

"I'm turrible bad 'bout takin' ther bit," declared the cowboy. "As fer drappin' these hyer pops—wal, I guess not!"

"Drap em, ur I'll drap you," growled the marshal, as he laid his hand on the butt of a revolver.

"Oh, no, you won't!" smiled Harry. "I kin stave that thar top button on yer coat all ter pieces afore ye kin git yer gun out. Don't try it, pard!"

Kayford saw that the desperate fellow meant business, and he held his hand. At the same time he cried to the crowd:

"I call on ye all t' help me take ther critter. Member ther reward, an' take him alive. Reddy for a rush w'en I give ther word."

"Take him alive." The words gave Hustler Harry renewed hope. If no man used a knife or a pistol, he felt that his chance of escape was good.

"Close the door, an' guard the windows!" added Kayford.

The time had come for action. The door must not be closed.

With a wild yell, Hustler Harry charged on the crowd. Boss Kayford stood in his path. Harry knew that no time must be lost in a struggle with the powerful marshal. Up into the air he leaped, sailing fairly over Kayford's head!

Such ear-splitting yells as pealed from the cowboy's lips had never been heard in the Silver Palace Saloon before. Harry appeared like a madman as he came rushing toward the surprised throng, and in an instant there was a general rush to get out of the way. This somehow failed to do.

Down before Hustler Harry's iron fists went two or three, and almost before any one could realize that he was escaping from the entire crowd, he shot out through the doorway and was gone!

CHAPTER XXX.

RESCUED—BY WHOM?

THERE were some decidedly crestfallen and disgusted people in Cimarron City that night. For the second time Hustler Harry escaped. He had appeared in their midst and left his defiance in the shape of a knife piercing the very center of the bulletin which proclaimed him an outlaw.

And in the morning the people of the camp found something which increased their excitement still more—in fact, placed the whole town at fever heat.

Upon the door of the Silver Palace was tacked a large sheet of thick brown paper, upon which, lettered with a marking-brush, was the following:

"HUSTLER HARRY'S DEFIANCE."

"MEN OF CIMARRON:"

"You have proclaimed me an outlaw, and I am an outcast from your midst. From this time your hands are against me and mine against you. We shall see who will conquer. I have begun the battle in earnest, and you shall learn that I am not unaided. Old Molina's daughter is in my power, and this night Molina himself becomes my prisoner. Let those who dare to strike against me beware, for I am

"CHIEF OF THE RED HEART BROTHERHOOD."

At the top and bottom of this startling bulletin were stamped two crimson hearts.

Within ten minutes after the first person discovered this defiance, a throng of excited people were standing in front of the Silver Palace reading and re-reading it. On every hand were heard exclamations of amazement not unmixed with consternation.

The Brothers of the Red Heart were feared.

Finally, some one cried:

"He says that Molina is his prisoner. Has any one seen the owner of the Red Star Mine this morning?"

No one had.

"To Molina's!"

The crowd took up the cry and surged along the street, gathering numbers as they went. In a short space of time the mine-owner's residence was reached.

In vain they rapped upon the door. There was no response; but it readily yielded before them when one turned the knob.

Into the house swarmed nearly a score of the crowd, before the leaders could close and fasten the door. A moment later they were searching through the rooms.

In less than a minute's time, a shout from above announced that a discovery of some kind had been made.

Up the stairs rushed the excited men only to find two fellows standing in front of the closed door of a room.

"What is it?" was the question.

"Mrs. Dayly. We found her bound hand and foot and gagged. She is in her night-clothes. We cut the cords, but she is too weak to do much. Some one go for Bridget O'Grady."

One of the crowd promptly hurried to obey this command, and while he was gone, the others discussed the recent exciting events.

In a short time Bridget O'Grady, a fat, good-natured looking matron, appeared.

"An' what's all this hullyabaloo about, I'd loike ter know, now?" she exclaimed. "Jist sthank away frum the front av that dure, ye haythens, an' allow Mrs. O'Grady ter see if the leddy is dead intirely. Are yez niver goin' to move at all, at all?"

With haste they made way for her to pass, and she entered the room.

A few moments passed, and then Mrs. O'Grady thrust out her head to say:

"Why don't yez go below, yez stharin' mummys! D' yez expect t' warruc into the leddy's room? As soon as iver she kin, she will come down an' tell yez all about it. Scoot, now!"

Laughing a little at Bridget's vigorous manner of giving off orders, they slowly filed downstairs, and remained below talking over the singular occurrences until the woman appeared, assisted by Mrs. O'Grady.

She made her story as brief as possible, for she complained that she was scarcely able to talk, her jaws still being stiff from being held rigidly in place by the gag.

Sometime in the night she had heard a cry and sprung up. The moment she stepped out into the hall, she was seized by two men and borne back into the room. A third man appeared, holding a dark-lantern, and despite her struggles, the two men held and bound her, one of them having gagged her first. When she was securely tied, they threw her on the bed and left her.

That was her entire story. When questioned, she said that all of the men wore masks. She had heard no further sounds after they left her alone in the room.

Molina was gone, and there was no doubt but he had been kidnapped. Those who had obtained admittance hurried out and told the tale to the clamorous mob around the house.

It is impossible to describe the excitement into which the town was thrown. The streets were filled with the entire populace of the place. No one thought of working, and nearly every man expressed a desire to turn out and hunt down the Brothers of the Red Heart.

As soon as Horace Kelnot heard the news, he hastened to Molina's house and listened to the story that the woman had to tell. He appeared to be quite taken aback by this unexpected move of Molina's foes.

When he returned he re-read the bulletin which had been posted upon the door of the Silver Palace during the night, and his face was dark with a look of suppressed rage.

"The villainous wretch!" he said, aloud. "He defies the entire town; but he shall be brought to justice. I swear to end the career of this Hustler Harry!"

A meeting of the citizens was called and a plan of action decided on. It was thought best to make one grand search for the secret retreat of the Red Heart Brotherhood. The meeting decided to choose an executive officer, to whom the entire command of the searchers should be given. There were three candidates, but Handy Horace had a majority over the others.

As soon as the meeting broke up, Kelnot began to organize his forces.

About that time Eric Craddoc, nearly famished and exhausted, appeared. Kelnot was at once informed. He sent for Boss Kayford, and when the marshal appeared, said:

"Kayford, can you arrest and hold a man without any warrant?"

"Fer you—yes," was the prompt reply.

"All right. There is a young fellow whom I slightly suspect of having a finger in this piece of dirty work, and I want him detained. Don't bother to take him to the jail. Clap the irons onto him and chuck him into one of the upper rooms of the Silver Palace. Put a guard over him."

"Who's ther galoot?"

"A tenderfoot named Craddoc. Know him?"

"Waal, I do. Whar is he?"

"He has just come into town from somewhere. You can find him."

"All right."

"I'll try to make it *right* later," said Kelnot, significantly, in a low tone.

The marshal winked and moved away.

After a time Kayford found Eric. The young Easterner was relieving the pangs of hunger as rapidly as possible. The marshal waited until Craddoc had finished eating, then he strode forward and laid a hand heavily on his shoulder.

"Hellow!" he growled. "Reckon ye're ther galoot w'ot I'm lookin' fer."

"What do you want of me?" demanded Eric, sharply.

"I has orders t' 'rest ye," was the reply.

"Arrest me? Surely there must be a mistake."

"Reckon not. Yer name's Craddoc, hain't it?"

"Yes, sir; but—"

"Thar hain't no buts 'bout it. Ye're ther very pansy blossom w'ot I'm lookin' fer. Cum on."

Eric's face colored with rage.

"Hold on, man!" he said, sharply. "I don't fancy being dragged through the streets like a thief. Let's understand this."

"D' yer mean t' resist an officer o' ther law?"

"No; but there may be some arrangement made."

"No, there can't. Cum on."

"But what's the charge?"

"Raisin' ther devil ginerally. Are ye goin' t' cum ur not?"

"Who makes this charge?"

"Don't make a durned bit o' diff'rance," growled Kayford, as he suddenly seized Eric's wrists and confined them with a pair of handcuffs.

Eric was furious, but Kayford produced a revolver and forced him to march along the street to the Silver Palace. There the young man was confined in one of the upper rooms and an armed guard set over him.

Some time later he was visited by Horace Kelnot.

"Well, young man," said the proprietor of the Silver Palace. "You appear to be in a scrape. I understand that there is a very serious charge against you."

"What is it?" demanded Eric, as he surveyed Handy Horace closely.

"It is said that you are an accomplice of this fellow, Hustler Harry, who has acknowledged himself to be an outlaw."

Eric sprung up.

"Who says so?" he cried. "It is a lie! I was deceived by that villain, but I found him out. I am no friend of his!"

Kelnot's eyes glowed, as he said:

"What do you mean? Found him out—how? Explain your words."

As briefly as possibly Eric did so, telling of witnessing Hustler Harry's interview with the three kidnappers and of the subsequent disappearance of the horses.

"But where have you been since these things occurred?" asked Kelnot. "Explain your absence from camp."

"I became lost among the hills while on the hunt for Miss Molina's captors," replied Eric, promptly. "I did attempt to return to this place yesterday, but found that I was lost. I was forced to spend two nights among the hills."

"You tell a very straight story," admitted Handy Horace, "and I will see what can be done for you."

"Thank you. I understand that Miss Molina's father was kidnapped last night and that parties are to be sent out to hunt down the bold perpetrators of these crimes. Can you give me any news?"

"Nothing further than that a number of searching parties have already left camp. I am about to go out with another large party."

Eric begged to be allowed to accompany them, but Kelnot told him that such a thing was impossible under the circumstances. Then the proprietor of the Silver Palace took his departure.

All that day Eric restlessly paced the little room in which he was confined. He was burning with indignation at the thought of the indignity that had been heaped upon him; but worse than everything else was being held a prisoner while the fate of his darling Pearl was unknown. But all his ravings were of no avail.

Night came, but still no word of success or failure. As the evening advanced, Eric heard the crowd gathering in the saloon below. He

heard loud voices, shouts, oaths and snatches of songs, and he knew that they were drinking deeply.

Little Eric Craddoc dreamed, however, of the danger which menaced him. The town was in the possession of the worst element. The best men had not yet come in from the search. Those who gathered in the Silver Palace Saloon were the roughs and toughs of the camp.

Gradually the commotion increased. The sound of some one making a speech was heard by the prisoner, but he could not hear the words uttered. A wild, hoarse cheer greeted the conclusion of the speech, then came the sound of the tramp of many booted feet. Up the stairs came the drunken men, swearing and shouting:

"Whar is the p'izen critter?"

With a crash the door gave way before them, and they poured into the room.

"Thar he is! Lynch him!"

A blood-chilling cry. At last Eric realized his danger. His guard made no attempt to defend him, but he fought like a demon. Forward they surged, pinning him to the wall. Then he was seized and borne from the room.

Down the stairs they went—out into the streets. A noose was placed around his neck. Yelling like fiends, the mob dragged him toward the tree.

Hark!

A sound of galloping horses and revolver-shots. The next instant several horsemen charge the crowd, their weapons spouting fire. Right and left scattered the mob. The horsemen sweep forward, wheel, and then are away.

When they least expect such a thing the lynchers are robbed of their prey!

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN INTERVIEW WITH TWO PRISONERS.

WITH her hands confined behind her, a bandage covering her eyes, and a heavy cloth fastened over her lips to prevent further outcry, Pearl Molina was borne away through the night by the band of masked horsemen. That ride in after years seemed like a horrible dream. She knew not to what fate she was being carried.

How long that ride continued she could not tell. It seemed that hours had passed since its beginning when the horsemen halted and held a hurried consultation in low tones. She took no note of what they said. Her heart was full of despair.

On again. Another halt; then she was passed down into the arms of some one who was not mounted. This person carried her a short distance; she heard a soft knock, low words, and then she was carried on again.

When she was finally put down something told her that she was in an underground cave, even before the bandage was removed from her eyes, which was quickly done.

"Hyer ye be, my purty," observed a voice, the owner of which was evidently attempting to speak cheerfully. "Ye'r all right an' sound. Nary bit hurted."

Quickly he removed the bandage from her lips and untied her hands.

She glanced around, and a light of surprise filled her eyes. She found herself sitting in a comfortable chair in what appeared to be a pleasant room. There was a carpet beneath her feet, the walls were concealed by curtains, there were a stand, sofa, chairs, books, and other things in view. A lamp suspended in the very center of the chamber shed a bright light over all.

"Where am I?"

She could not refrain from asking the question, even though she felt to do so were useless.

The masked man laughed a little as he replied:

"I'm not 'lowed ter tell ye that, miss. When ther chief comes ye kin ax him all ther questions ye want ter."

She said nothing further, and the man left the chamber, saying, ere he departed:

"There is a bell on the stand. If ye wants anythin', jest ring."

Then the door closed behind him, there was the sound of a shooting bolt, followed by retreating footsteps, which grew fainter and fainter, and finally died out in the distance.

She was alone. Rising, she staggered to the little sofa and flung herself downward upon it.

How long she lay thus and whether she slept or not she could not tell. She was aroused by a touch on the arm, and started up to see a tall man who wore a mask standing beside her. She expressed no emotion, although her first glance convinced her that the masked man was the strange cowboy.

"Ah, mer leetle sweet!" exclaimed the mask. "Ye hav' bin takin' a snooze, I reckon?"

She gazed at him scornfully for a moment ere she spoke. Her eyes glowed in a manner which plainly indicated that her spirit was not yet entirely crushed. There was an infinite amount of scorn in her voice as she replied:

"I am not your little sweet, you contemptible villain!"

A laugh of evident amusement came from beneath the mask.

"That's ther kind I like ther style of," uttered the man softly. "Plenty of grit. Good er nuff!"

"You may as well remove that mask," declared Pearl. "I know you well. You are the contemptible scoundrel who pretended to rescue me from the hands of the Spanish kidnapper!"

For several moments the man did not speak. He regarded her intently through the twin holes of the mask.

"That's all right," he finally observed. "Reckon my way of torkin' guv me erway. I hav'torked so much in this hyer style of late that it seems natteral like, an' I torks so w'en I don't want ter."

"Then you acknowledge? You do not deny that you are the desperado cowboy?"

"What's ther use? Thar hain't no reason w'y I sh'u'd. I hav' leetle fear of you denouncin' me, sweet one."

Pearl made a gesture indicative of intense disgust.

"Don't!" she begged. "Have mercy and spare your soft words! I would rather receive a blow in the face."

The man said nothing, but continued to gaze at her as if fascinated.

"I have no doubt," continued the girl, "but you are playing a double part. You are having your day now, but justice is pretty sure to triumph in the end."

"That is er rayther stale belief. It is only in ther story-books w'at that allus happens. In real life, ther feller with ther most brains, ef he is a villing or a parson, usually kems out onter ther top of the heap. In ther leetle game w'at I'm playin' I holds all ther high keerds jest now."

"The tide will turn," asserted Pearl, who was surprised at her own boldness. "God will not suffer such a scoundrel to succeed in his evil ways. The earthquake will come when you least expect it."

"Mebbe, but I'll take mer chances. Them w'at fights ag'in' me will find that I am a mighty Hard Nut ter Crack."

"Why have you taken me a prisoner? Do you intend to hold me for ransom?"

"Wal, not prezactly. Ther real truth is that I'm gittin' on in y'ars an' hav' decided ter took unto myself a wife."

Pearl could not repress a cry of consternation. A look of terror sprung into her eyes and she shrank from him, as she panted:

"What—what? You cannot mean—"

"But I do," he asserted, quietly. "That's jest w'at I mean. I'm hyer ter inform ye of that fact that I has looked onter you with favorable eyes."

"But I will never! I should prefer death to such a fate!—death a hundred times!"

He drew up a chair and sat down before her. He was very calm and deliberate in his movements, and she regarded him with increasing dread.

"I will cease this foolish manner of talking and act natural in your presence," he said. "I am far from being the rough, uncultivated cowboy that I appear to be. In fact, I tell you the truth when I say that I am a gentleman. In becoming my wife you will hot have a common, brainless lout for a husband. I have wealth to a limited extent. Most men would consider themselves fortunate if they possessed a fourth as much. I am not an unhandsome man, although you have seen me far from my best while I appeared like a cowboy."

"But you are a villain!—a—a—"

"Not so fast, Miss Molina. I am not such a villain as I appear to be. The Brothers of the Red Heart, of whom I am the chief, are not bad men, though we have been denounced as such. The organization is a sort of league for mutual protection against foes. In this rough land there is little law at best, and it is sometimes necessary for individuals to take the law into their own hands in order to obtain justice. The Brothers of the Red Heart have punished many a criminal and the people have cursed us for our trouble. As their chief—"

"I have heard enough!" cried Pearl, with flashing eyes. "You cannot deceive me. The Brothers of the Red Heart are a villainous band of outlaws. This same league foully murdered old Andrew Foscolo!—your hand struck him down! Ha! You start, and well you may! Don't talk more to me of the honor of this das-tardly Brotherhood! You cannot blind my eyes!"

"And so she filled your ears with such stuff, did she? She was never more deceived in her life. It was not the Brothers of the Red Heart who did that job."

A mocking exclamation of disbelief came from the girl's lips.

"Of course you will deny it! Of course you deny that after they had nursed you back to life, you turned like a treacherous serpent and stung the hand that fed you! But there is one thing which betrays you—that mark upon your wrist."

She pointed straight at his left wrist, upon which the red heart-shaped birthmark was exposed to view. The man started as if shot, and suddenly turned his arm so that the crimson heart was concealed from view.

"Curse that mark!" he cried. "It has got me into untold trouble. I know not whether the murderer of Andrew Foscolo bore such a mark

or not, but I do know that I did not strike Foscolo down as that crazy girl claims."

"You deny it, which is natural, but just so sure as the sun continues to rise and set, you will be punished for the crime. You cannot escape! The day of judgment is coming—is even nearer than you dream!"

The man appeared startled, but he finally burst into an unpleasant laugh.

"You will not believe the truth, I see," he observed, "so I am forced to let you believe just what you please. But let me tell you this ere I go: Within three days you shall become my wife!"

"Never!"

"It is well enough to say 'never,' but we shall see what the result will be. I fancy that I shall be able to find a way to bring you to terms. Remember that I am just what as Hustler Harry, the cowboy, I claim to be—a very Hard Nut."

He arose to depart, and her eyes followed his every movement.

"The time is coming when I will not leave you without a parting kiss, my sweet," he said, mockingly; "but just now I will forego the pleasure. Ta, ta."

With a graceful wave of his hand and a low bow, he passed out.

Bolting the door behind him, he walked swiftly along the passage. He passed onward through the darkness as if thoroughly familiar with the place.

Soon he came to another heavy door, which he unbolted. The door swung open and he stepped into a small lighted chamber, closing the door behind him.

He found himself in a place that was far from being as comfortable as the chamber he had just left. No carpet covered the uneven floor, and the rough walls stood out in all their unpleasant bareness.

As he entered, a man sat up upon a mass of old clothes where he had been lying in a corner. The lamplight showed a person which somewhat resembled the "Uncle Peter Hodge" of our story.

It was the detective, Dan Shark. His disguise had been seriously disarranged in the scuffle when he was made a prisoner. His hands were confined by manacles.

"Hellow!" exclaimed the chief, as he advanced and sat down on a rude stool. "How are ye feelin' 'bout now, Danny?"

The detective's eyes shone with a light of recognition.

"I can't say that I am feeling any too well, Jack," he replied.

The masked man laughed.

"Wal, ye putt yer hull fut inter it, didn't ye?" he observed. "Reckon this is yer last trail, ole man. Yemade a big mistook w'en ye attempted ter butt ag'in' Hustler Harry, ther Hard Nut ter Crack."

"Oh, stow that kind of gab, and talk natural! You make me extremely tired."

The chief laughed again and appeared highly amused.

"But I rayther reckon this hyer kind of chin an' my make-up as ther cowboy puzzled ye er leetle."

"I am ashamed to say that I thought there might be a mistake," acknowledged Shark. "But after I appeared as Uncle Peter Hodge I did not have a good chance to scoop you, Jack. I thought that if I did so in Cimarron, where you had so many friends, I might find it difficult to take you away. I waited for a better chance and made a mess of the whole business."

"And, as I said before, this is your last trail," said the masked man, dropping the rough manner of speaking. "Your goose is cooked."

"Do you intend to murder me?"

"Oh, no. The boys believe that you are here to hunt down the band. I shall let them decide your fate. But how in the world did you come to run your nose into this trap?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I was a little rash, but as I had entered this cave once, I thought I could do so again."

"Been in here once!" exclaimed the chief, in great excitement. "What do you mean?"

Quietly Old Shark told him of his former visit to the place and what he had seen and heard. The chief was amazed and alarmed.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "You could have ruined us with half a dozen words! Your capture was a most fortunate thing. The entrance must be more closely guarded."

"Had I not fallen into this trap, I should have destroyed this villainous league ere I left this part of the country," confessed the detective.

"Well, that is averted. I have been playing a desperate game, and the cards appeared to take a turn against me for a time; but just now things are once more working finely."

"When am I to be wiped out?" asked Shark, coolly.

"I can't tell you just when," was the reply, as the outlaw gazed admiringly upon his prisoner. "The band will decide your doom the next time that they are all assembled."

"Well, I hope that will not be soon. I say,

Jack, as I am about to pass over the river, I have one request to make of you."

"If it is not an absurd one, I will grant it, Shark. By Jove! I admire your nerve! What do you want?"

"To be fed well till the time comes to pass out. I have a horrible appetite, and the most unpleasant sensation I have ever experienced is hunger."

The chief stared at Shark in blank silence for several seconds, then he broke into a laugh.

"You take the cake!" he declared.

"Well, I do when I can get it," was Shark's calm reply. "Just send it in."

"With pleasure," said the chief, as he left the rocky cell.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DOWN THE SECRET PASSAGE.

BENEATH the cabin far up on the mountain-side was a cave. Ruth Foscolo had accidentally discovered a trap-door in the floor shortly after taking possession of the deserted hut. Upon opening this door a flight of rude steps was revealed, and further investigations demonstrated the fact that the cabin was built near the entrance to a cave.

Within the underground chamber the Girl Avenger made the grave of the faithful old negro who had died while serving her. She was unable to carry the body there without assistance, but this she readily obtained by paying for it.

After Black Joe was buried Ruth was not idle. She spent much time in Cimarron and was pretty well posted concerning the startling things which followed the kidnapping of Pearl. Only while she slept did she rest from the hunt for vengeance.

It was a strange freak of hers to bury Black Joe in that cave. She knew not herself why she chose such a spot. She resolved to visit the grave as often as possible while able to do so and renew her oath each time as long as the murderer lived.

Late on the very night that Eric Craddoc was rescued from the hands of the lynchers she was seized by a desire to visit the negro's lonely grave. Taking up a lighted candle, she opened the trap-door and descended the steps into the gloomy cave.

The cave was not very large, but Black Joe's grave was at the further end. In making her way to it, Ruth was obliged to pass a large round well-like hole which extended downward to an unknown depth. Several times she had held a light over the mouth of the strange hole and peered downward into its depths, but only darkness met her gaze.

Just now something caused her to pause there again. Once more she bent over the place and peered downward. As she did so she started violently, for a sound that seemed like a faint far-away murmur of voices came out of the depths.

What did it mean?

Eager, intently she listened, and after a few minutes had elapsed, she thought she heard the sounds again.

A person of a superstitious mind would have been badly frightened; but instead of being alarmed, Ruth was puzzled and interested. For an instant the thought that the place was haunted and that she heard spirit voices in the depths of the well-like hole did pass through her mind. Who had inhabited the old cabin on the mountain-side when it was first built? A fiendish murderer perhaps who had thrown his victims' bodies into that hole in the gloomy old cave beneath the hut. The thought was startling, but Ruth banished it.

"There is a mystery here," she murmured, as she knelt beside the hole. "What is the meaning of those sounds? Is it possible that this hole connects with a place where there are human beings?"

Again she listened. Nearly ten minutes passed before her patience was rewarded. Then quite distinctly she heard the far-away murmur of voices coming up out of the depths.

There was no doubt of it that time. It was no trick of her imagination. She distinctly heard the sounds.

"Those were the voices of living human beings," was her mental decision. "This place opens to the spot where they are. I believe that I have found something worth investigating."

She picked up a small pebble and dropped it into the hole. Listening closely, she heard it strike the bottom after a brief space of time.

Ruth was not a little surprised at this. If the bottom of the hole was so near, where did the sounds come from? There must be an opening into the side of the hole.

"I wish I had some means of descending into this place," she mused, aloud. "I would like to go down there very much."

Something caused her to search around the mouth of the hole, and to her surprise and delight, she found a mass of rope lying under the edge of a projecting flat rock. Her satisfaction increased when she undid the mass and found it to be an old rope-ladder. It was composed of

large heavy ropes and appeared stout despite its aged look.

"This has been used for the purpose of descending into that place," Ruth murmured. "Now if it will only hold me, I will go down."

Carefully she examined it its entire length. It appeared all right. There were two large iron hooks at one end, which were evidently for the purpose of making a ladder fast at the upper end.

"I wish I could try it," thought the girl.

She did try it in various ways, but still she knew that there might be great danger when she attempted the descent.

Near the edge of the well was a place where the hooks had evidently been attached more than once. Carefully she placed them there again and allowed the mass of rope to slide downward and disappear into the gloom.

"Now," she said, softly, "I need a light while descending. How am I to have one? I would never, never dare to go down into the darkness there."

Little she thought that not one girl in a thousand would dare to descend into that unknown place under any circumstances.

After a few moments of thought she removed from its socket the candle which served her as a light, and with the aid of her handkerchief, soon succeeded in fastening it in an upright position on the front of her hat. In that way she made a sort of coal-miner's light.

Even then she hesitated about trusting herself upon that untried ladder. A man of sober judgment would never have done so rash an act unless in a desperate emergency.

Finally, with a prayer on her lips, she swung over the edge and began the perilous descent.

Little dreamed Ruth Foscolo that her movements had been watched by a pair of sharp eyes, and that as she disappeared, a dark form stole forward to the edge of the hole and watched the light as it sunk lower and lower. But whoever the spy was, he could not have been a very desperate foe. If so, a double slash with a keen knife would have sent the girl downward to death on the rocks at the bottom of the hole.

Carefully Ruth made her way downward. The rope-ladder swayed but held fast. Slowly she descended, her heart beating high with excitement. It seemed that she would never reach the bottom.

The hole was nearly uniform in size with its mouth, although it may have grown slightly smaller as it continued downward. It seemed to be sunk in the solid ledge. Ruth kept a sharp lookout for an opening, but found none until she reached the bottom.

When at last her feet touched the ground she saw before her a passage that led into the darkness. At that very moment she again heard the sound of distant voices, and the sounds came out of the passage.

She started forward and walked very slowly. Instinctively she had drawn a revolver to defend herself if an emergency should arise.

She did not go far before she came to a flight of steps cut into the earth and stone. The further end of the steps was lost in the darkness.

Downward she went. It seemed as if the steps would never end. She was amazed at the length of the descent.

Finally she reached the bottom, but the passage still led onward before her, descending quite sharply now. Down this passage she made her way, noting that it gradually seemed to twist around like a corkscrew.

Ever and anon she heard the sound of voices. These sounds now seemed much nearer, but she believed that they were still far distant. The underground passage had acted as a conductor of the sounds.

A second flight of steps was reached. At the foot of these the passage still went on.

Ruth was filled with wonder and began to believe that the passage would lead her to the very base of the mountain. She was right.

At last the sound of many voices came to her ears with startling distinctness. She knew that she was not far from the speakers, and proceeded with greater caution.

Finally she came to a precipice. She looked downward, but saw only darkness. She listened and could hear the words of some one speaking somewhere below.

"Great heavens!" she gasped. "That voice! It is his—my father's murderer!"

She became fearfully excited. From head to foot she trembled like a leaf.

"Fate has led me here that I may keep my vow!" she panted. "I must get down there!"

Suddenly she noticed at her feet a mass of ropes. Suppressing a cry of satisfaction she hastily examined it, and discovered that it was another rope ladder. The hooks were still fast hitched, and all she had to do was push the ladder over the edge. Then it was ready for her to descend.

Before she ventured upon the rope, she extinguished the candle on the front of her hat. Then, with a prayer for strength and good fortune, she grasped the rope and slowly descended.

Down, down, down! At last the bottom was

reached. Guided by the sound of the voice, she stole forward. A bend in the rocky wall showed her a light ahead.

In less than a minute more she was looking into the council-chamber of the Brothers of the Red Heart!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AN UNLUCKY TURN ON FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

It was an interesting scene that met the gaze of the Girl Avenger. Twelve men in dark robes, masks and peaked caps were standing in a half-circle in front of a slightly-raised platform. Upon the platform stood another, wearing a white robe, mask and cap. Upon the breast of every man was a crimson heart.

Just in front of the platform, sitting upon a low stool, was a man whose hands and feet were confined by irons. It was the detective, Dan Shark.

The chief of the Red Hearts was saying:

"Brothers we have tried this man and found him guilty of the charge brought against him. We have found that he is a sleuth-hound sent here to hunt us down. He has learned many of our secrets, among which is the manner of entering this secret retreat. While he lives we are not safe. He must die! Yet I alone cannot pronounce his doom. In fact, unless there is a tie in any vote, I have nothing to say. But I have a fancy that you will all be united in this matter. Let every man vote for safety, even though a human life lies in our path!"

Silent as so many grim shadows the twelve listened, never expressing by word or sign if they approved of what the white-robed chief had said.

"My brothers, what shall be the fate of the spy?"

Then through the chamber echoed a terrible word that seemed to come from the lips of each of the twelve:

"Death!"

"A unanimous decision, I believe," declared the chief; "but that I may be sure that you are all united in this matter, let every man who thinks death a proper fate for the spy lift the hand nearest the heart."

The twelve dark-robed figures held up their left hands.

"That settles it; you are unanimous. Daniel Shark, stand up while I pronounce your sentence."

Without hesitation, the fearless detective arose.

"Daniel Shark," said the chief, slowly lifting his left hand, "the Brothers of the Red Heart have decided that you must die, and according to the rules of this order you are to be given twenty-four hours in which to prepare yourself for death. At the end of that time you are to be executed in such a manner as the man chosen to perform the act may see fit."

Shark made no attempt to speak, and at a wave of the chief's hand, he was led slowly away by two of the robed figures.

When the white-robed chief lifted his left hand to pronounce the detective's sentence, the flowing sleeve of the garment he wore fell back, leaving his wrist bare and exposed to the full flood of the light.

The Girl Avenger, crouching in the darkness, plainly saw the crimson heart upon the chief's wrist.

"It is he!" she hissed through her clinched teeth. "His last minute has come! May justice direct my bullet!"

Raising her revolver she took a careful aim at the heart of the white-robed man. At that instant the life of the chief of the Red Heart Brotherhood hung by a thread.

What was it—a step, a sound, or imagination—that caused the girl to lower the weapon and wheel swiftly prepared for an attack. She fancied that she heard it behind her.

Sharply she peered back into the darkness, but saw nothing. Still she believed that she had heard a sound; she thought that some one might be creeping upon her. For five minutes she crouched there staring into the gloom, but at the end of that time she was forced to confess that appearances indicated that she had been deceived. When she again turned and looked into the council-chamber of the Red Heart Brotherhood, the chief had disappeared.

Ruth choked down the exclamation of disappointment that arose to her lips, but mentally she cried:

"What a fool I was to lose this opportunity! I could have done the work, and in the excitement which followed, escaped up the rope-ladder, drawing it up after me and thus preventing pursuit. Now I must wait till the chance comes again."

Gradually the men departed from the council-chamber. Ruth from her position could see the mouths of two passages. A desire to explore the place seized upon the watching girl.

Silently she watched and waited.

In less than thirty minutes the council-chamber was deserted. From out of one of the passages came the sounds of laughter and scratches of song. Evidently the Brothers of the Red Heart were enjoying themselves.

With the revolver still clutched in her hand,

Ruth stole forward till she obtained a position where she could see the walls on every hand. Quite close to her she discovered a narrow opening which she had not before observed. In a moment she darted into this opening.

"Perhaps this leads to the surface," she thought, and went slowly forward with one hand against the wall.

She did not intend to go far, but an unseen and irresistible power seemed to be leading her onward. She did not go far before she perceived a faint light ahead. She paused and stared straight toward the light, listening closely.

"What was that? She seemed to hear the sound of a woman weeping. Curiosity led her slowly forward.

She soon saw that the faint light shone through some aperture in the side of the passage. As she approached the sound of weeping became more distinct. A thought flashed through Ruth's mind. Pearl—could it be?

She soon reached the spot where the light shone out through a small square hole in a heavy door. Then she peered through into the chamber where Pearl was confined. She could not repress a little cry as she saw the form of her friend, who was reclining on the sofa.

"Pearl! Pearl!"

Softly, eagerly she called the girl's name. Pearl started and looked toward the door. The light shone through the aperture and fell upon Ruth's face. Pearl uttered a cry of amazement and joy.

"Ruth!" she exclaimed. "Can it be?"

She sprung up and came toward the door.

"Yes, it is I," replied Ruth, softly.

"But how came you here?"

"I cannot stop to explain now. I am almost as much surprised to see you here as you are to see me. I had no thought of finding you until a moment ago. But how is this door fastened? I must release you and take you from this place."

"I think the door is bolted. Perhaps you can find where it is fastened. Oh, make haste for the love of Heaven and aid me to escape from this terrible place!"

There was no need to urge Ruth to hasten. Swiftly she felt over the surface of the door and soon her fingers found the bolt. In another instant the door swung open, creaking on its hinges.

"Come!" whispered Ruth, hoarsely.

The fair captive made haste to leave the chamber. Then Ruth closed and bolted the door.

"Now," said the Girl Avenger, in a whisper, "we must be very cautious. If we are not, you will be recaptured and I shall be taken too. That would be fearful."

Pearl clutched Ruth by the arm.

"Oh, I cannot go!" she gasped. "I cannot go and leave him!"

Ruth was startled.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Whom?"

"My father; he is a prisoner here."

For a moment Ruth was silent, thinking hurriedly. Then she said, impressively:

"Pearl, listen to me. We must not waste our time in attempting to rescue your father—"

The excited listener interrupted her.

"But I cannot leave him here to die! No, no! I will stay and perish with him!"

"Hush!" commanded Ruth. "Listen to reason. We must lose no time in getting out of this den. If we attempt to release your father, we may be detected. If we are, all chance of getting out is lost. If we escape, we can turn the whole camp of Cimarron in here upon these outlaws and they will be captured or killed. Then your father will be rescued. Do you see?"

Pearl hesitated and seemed in doubt. She longed to go to her father and help him escape. Ruth grasped her arm and drew her gently toward the council-chamber.

"Come!" she whispered. "Do not waste another moment. We are in constant danger of being detected."

With some reluctance, Pearl yielded. With quick, light steps they advanced along the passage, hand in hand. They soon reached a spot where they could gaze into the council-chamber, and with a feeling of consternation, Ruth saw that two of the Brothers of the Red Heart were there. Placing her lips close to Pearl's ear, she whispered:

"We must wait until they depart. Keep perfectly quiet."

The two men were talking.

"By Jove!" exclaimed one. "We have our hands full of prisoners."

The other laughed and replied:

"You are right. The chief seems to have a regular mania for taking prisoners just now."

"But there will soon be one less."

"Yes, the detective's hours are numbered. By George! he is a cool one!"

"You are right. I never saw his beat. I don't reckon that he has given up all hopes of escape even now."

"I believe you are right; but he might as well. There is no such a thing for him as escape."

"I suppose that the chief will attempt to squeeze the Red Star Mine out of old Molina."

"Reckon that's his game; Guess he means to

make the girl his wife as well. I don't fancy that Molina will ever leave this place alive."

"No more do I."

"That was a strange misunderstanding concerning that young tenderfoot. It seems that the chief sent one or two of the men into Cimarron to work up the crowd against the youngster and get him lynched. That worked all right; but at the same time a portion of the gang got the idea that the chief considered Craddoc of importance and desired him for special use. As a result, they swept in and snatched the young fellow from the lynchers. The chief was furious when he found out what they had done without orders from him."

"Where is the young fellow now?"

"In the cabin, bound and gagged."

After a few more words, the two moved away and disappeared into one of the passages.

"Now is our time!" whispered Ruth.

Clinging to each other's hand, the two girls darted forward. They were under the full glare of light within the chamber, when there came a hoarse shout of surprise, and two men sprang out of a passage and rushed toward them.

Pearl uttered a cry of terror and despair, and Ruth quickly threw up the hand which held the revolver. But before she could fire she was seized from behind. An instant later the two men were upon them.

"Hang t' her!" cried one. "By Moses! here's er go now!"

Ruth struggled desperately, but was easily handled by her captor. In the struggle the revolver was discharged, and in a few seconds the chamber was filled with the Brothers of the Red Heart.

Both girls were easily conquered.

At the sight of Ruth the men were filled with amazement. How came she there?

"Place them both in the chamber where Miss Molina was confined," ordered the white-robed chief.

Then they were borne back along the passage.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WITHIN THE CLUTCH OF A FIEND.

INTO the prison chamber the two girls were thrust and the heavy door closed behind them.

Pearl appeared utterly crushed by this unlucky turn of fortune's wheel, and Ruth Foscoco's heart was filled with despair. But Ruth had strength enough to assist her companion to walk across the chamber, and when the sofa was reached, Pearl flung herself down upon it, bursting into a flood of tears. Ruth knelt by her side and tried to comfort her.

"Oh, Ruth!" sobbed Pearl, "if it had not been for me—if you had not tried to rescue me, you would not be here now. I feel that I am to blame for your present misfortune."

"Hush, dear friend," said the brave girl, trying not to let Pearl see how much she herself was distressed. "You are in no way to blame for this. Do not weep."

But Pearl's heart was too full, and she sobbed as if it were breaking.

"I cannot help feeling that I am the cause of your capture by these dreadful men," she declared. "Oh, what will become of us?"

"We will escape in some manner," was the brave reply. "The All-wise Being will not allow these wretches to triumph forever!"

"Oh, I hope we may escape, but my heart is full of despair. Father is a prisoner in the hands of these wretches, and you heard that one who said he would never leave this cave alive. I fear we are all doomed."

"But the men of Cimarron may find this cavern."

"No, no! I fear they will never come here so many miles away."

"Why, Pearl," exclaimed Ruth. "This cave is within rifle-shot of the camp."

At first Pearl could not believe her companion's words; but Ruth soon explained everything and made her understand just where the cave was located. The fact that they were so near the camp filled Pearl's heart with hope, and her friend did not tell her that she feared that the very fact of their being so near would prevent their rescue. Ruth knew that the men of Cimarron did not think that the retreat of the Red Heart Brotherhood was within miles of the camp, therefore they would not look for it until they were far away.

Finally Pearl said:

"And Eric—did they mean him when they spoke of another prisoner? One spoke his name!"

"Yes, I think they meant him. He was rescued from a band of lynchers in Cimarron by a small party of horsemen who charged into the town. It seems that the horsemen were a part of this band of outlaws."

At this moment they heard the sound of some one advancing along the passage. The bolt which held the door was shot back, and the white-robed chief of the Red Hearts stood before them.

"Hello! hello!" came from beneath the white mask. "So this is my new bird. I took a fancy to inspect her."

Ruth Foscoco's eyes gleamed with a deadly light, but she said nothing. Pearl shrank from

the chief in fear. He kept his eyes fastened on Ruth, and continued:

"I would give something to know just how you succeeded in getting in here, my girl. That old woman is getting careless when she allows two persons to pass her. Such negligence shall be punished."

Still Ruth kept her lips tightly closed. She understood that the chief thought she had obtained admittance by the regular entrance, and she resolved not to undeceive him. If the rope-ladder was not found it might possibly aid some of them to escape by and by.

"Why don't you speak, girl?" cried the chief, peevishly. "Have you lost your tongue?"

"What do you want me to say?" asked the Girl Avenger, in icy tones.

"Say anything; don't act as if you are dumb. How came you here?"

That is for you to find out."

He gazed straight at her for a moment, and then burst into an unpleasant laugh.

"You are a cool one, but your spirit will be broken ere you leave this place. Do you know where you are?"

"Yes, in the hands of a fiend—a murderer!"

Ruth fairly hissed the words.

The man appeared startled. After a few seconds, he said, with a sneer:

"You are complimentary to say the least."

"But truthful. You dare not deny the accusation, you wretch!"

"What is the use? To do so would be simply wasting breath."

"To do so would be a lie!"

Ruth had started to her feet, and now confronted the white-robed chief. Her face was transformed by a terrible look and her eyes blazed strangely. Involuntarily he shrunk back before her. She laughed—a wild, chilling laugh.

"You shrink before the child of the man you so foully murdered!" she cried. "Were your face uncovered, your guilt would be plainly written upon it. Hustler Harry—Philip Barret, murderer, justice does not sleep!"

The man's eyes were fastened steadily upon her. When she ceased to speak, he uttered a sneering exclamation.

"Justice may not sleep," but I reckon that just now the hand of justice is paralyzed, so that it cannot harm me."

"You do not deny that you are Hustler Harry—that you are Philip Barret?"

"Indeed not. I acknowledge that I am Philip Barret, and am proud of the fact that as Hustler Harry I blinded the eyes of more than one of my foes—fooled them until I got them into my power. This is my day of triumph."

"You never deceived me for an instant, you blood-stained wretch! I suppose that you will have the boldness to acknowledge that you murdered my poor father?"

"Not quite, for I deny that it was a murder. He sprung upon me and I struck him down in self-defense."

"And over his body I swore to have your life for the dastardly act."

A slender dagger gleamed in the Girl Avenger's hand, and she sprung forward, striking straight at his breast, crying:

"This for vengeance!"

He sprung back and caught her hand even when the point of the dagger had pierced the white robe. With a terrible oath, he struck her senseless to his feet.

"There, you she-cat!" he snarled. "See if that will quiet you."

Then he turned and left the chamber.

Pearl, trembling and terrified, bent over the unconscious girl and called her name. Ruth did not stir or reply. Pearl began to rub her hands and loosened her dress. Then she sprung up and rung the bell which stood upon the stand. A minute passed and there was no response. Then she seized the bell and rung it close to the aperture in the door. In a few moments a black mask appeared at the opening.

"Bring me some water," commanded Pearl.

She was quickly obeyed, and with the aid of the water, soon restored the stricken girl's senses.

At first Ruth could remember nothing, but she soon started up, exclaiming:

"That fiend! He escaped me! Oh, heavens! will the time never come?"

She sunk back, and Pearl endeavored to soothe her as well she could. As soon as Ruth was able to rise, her companion assisted her to the sofa. One of Ruth's temples was bruised and discolored where the brute's fist had fallen. This place Pearl bathed, and sat by Ruth's side, until the strange girl fell into a fitful slumber, more than an hour later.

Ruth had slept but a short time when the cell door again swung open and Martel Molina was thrust in. Pearl uttered a cry and sprung toward him, to be caught in his arms.

"My darling girl!" chokingly murmured the mine owner, as he bent and kissed her tenderly.

"Oh, father, father!" she sobbed, and could say no more.

She clung about his neck, and he held her close to him, as if he would shield her from further danger. It was an affecting meeting, and Ruth who had awakened, witnessed it all.

Finally, Pearl led her father to a chair. Then she knelt at his feet and gazed up into his drawn,

haggard face. He took her cheeks between his two hands and looked down into her blue eyes.

"My poor girl!" he murmured. "How have these desperate men treated you? Have they offered you insult or outrage? By heavens! if they have, they shall suffer!"

"No, papa, no further outrage than in keeping me confined here. But that terrible man, the chief, swears that I shall become his wife."

"I know, I know," groaned Molina. "He has dared to tell me that. My God! Can it be that such wickedness can long triumph?"

There was a despairing ring to his voice, and she knew that he considered their case desperate indeed. She did not whisper to him that her heart trembled more for him than for herself.

"We must not give up all hope, dear father. Providence may intervene in our behalf."

"Something will end the career of this treacherous cowboy, I hope. What a traitor he is! And that Craddoc—he, too, was false."

Pearl started up.

"No, no, father! You wrong him! Eric is good and true."

"Good and true!" he repeated. "He is as vile a traitor as this Hustler. In fact, he is in league with the pretended cowboy, and I have no doubt but that Eric Craddoc is one of these red-hearted desperadoes in cloak and mask."

"But, father, I can prove to you that you are wrong. Mr. Craddoc may have been deceived by this false cowboy, but never has he played a double part. At the present time, like ourselves, he is a prisoner in the hands of these villains."

She then told him what she had heard from Ruth's lips. She also told him how the Girl Avenger aided her to escape from the cell, and what followed. When she had finished the story she noticed that Ruth was awake, and she hastened to make her father and the strange girl acquainted.

Ruth fully substantiated the story which Pearl had told, and Molina was obliged to confess that he had been in the wrong.

"It is possible that I judged the young man a trifle harshly," he admitted. "I fear that I did. And so he is a prisoner?"

"Yes, made such through a misunderstanding. The cowboy intended that he should be lynched by the roughs of Cimarron."

"That infernal cowboy shall be brought to justice!" cried Molina. "When I am once more free I will spend half my fortune in bringing him to the punishment which his wicked deeds so justly merit!"

"Hush, father!" gasped Pearl. "Do not say that! If you are heard it may seal your fate."

Within her heart she felt that, unless the hand of Providence interfered, his fate was already sealed. It seemed as if they were all doomed.

"You are right," he acknowledged, in a lower tone. "I should have a care. I may go forth from this place a poor man. Yet I still have a hope that this den will be discovered by Kelnot."

"Father, do you know where this cave is located?"

"No, I do not, but I fancy that it is within ten miles of Cimarron City."

"It is nearer than that. It is within hailing distance of the camp."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the startled man.

"But true," declared Ruth.

The Girl Avenger then told him where the cave was located and how she came to be there. When she had finished, Martel Molina uttered a hopeless groan.

"It will not be found," he muttered, in dejection. "Kelnot and his men are searching miles away among the hills. No one will think of looking for the retreat almost within the borders of the camp."

"That is what I feared," said Ruth.

"They came upon me when I slept," Molina added. "I was seized, bound and gagged before I could resist. Then they placed me on a horse and we rode miles and miles. I tried to keep track of the course we traveled, but soon found myself confused. I little thought when we paused that I was so near the place from which we started.

"How came these men to let you come in here?" asked Pearl.

"I was brought here at the order of the chief," was the reply. "He came and talked with me and threatened dire things if I did not try to influence you to marry him. Then they brought me here."

At this moment there came a rap on the door, and one of the Brotherhood announced that the time given for Molina to remain with Pearl had expired.

When the mine-owner arose to go, Pearl clung to him, sobbing and saying:

"Be careful, papa; say nothing that will anger this dreadful man."

He held her in his arms and kissed her.

"For your sake I will be careful," he said.

"May God aid us!"

Then he advanced and the door opened before him. He was seized on either side and hurried along the dark passage. Another door swung open and he was pushed forward into the cell. Then he found himself face to face with Eric Craddoc!

CHAPTER XXXV.

A FRIEND IN CLOAK AND MASK.

The door closed heavily behind him and the bolt shot into its socket.

Martel Molina was surprised to see young Craddoc in the cell. The young man had been placed there while the mine-owner was with Pearl and Ruth.

"Mr. Molina," said Eric, and then advanced without another word, holding out his hand.

Molina hesitated but an instant, then he grasped the outstretched hand.

"Mr. Craddoc," he said, "you too have been unfortunate."

"Yes, both unfortunate and fortunate. It is a misfortune to fall into the hands of this dastardly band of land-sharks, but as they rescued me from almost certain death, I might consider myself fortunate. You are the one who have been unfortunate, and you have my sincere sympathy."

There was something about the young man's manner that won the mine-owner, despite his feeling of prejudice.

"You are right," admitted Molina. "I have been unfortunate, indeed. It is not for myself that I am concerned, but Pearl, my darling, is in the hands of these villains."

There was a look of sympathy and absolute pain on Eric's manly face as Molina spoke of Pearl.

"Is there no hope of escape or rescue?" cried the young man. "Must this demon—this treacherous creature who pretended to be a friend—triumph? It does not seem that such a thing can be."

"Of whom do you speak?"

"That dastardly cowboy, Hustler Harry."

"Then you have penetrated his treachery?"

"Yes, and I only regret that I did not shoot him dead, as I saw him talking with his hired tools. That might have prevented a part of this trouble."

Eric then told the mine-owner of what he had seen and learned. When he had finished Molina held out his hand, and said:

"Mr. Craddoc, I was deceived at one time, and was unjust enough to believe you in league with this two-faced whelp. I now ask your forgiveness."

Eric grasped the hand warmly.

"I do not wonder that you thought so," he declared. "Everything seemed to indicate that I was an accomplice of his. Any one in your place might have been led to believe so."

Eric little dreamed how fast he was winning the respect of Pearl's father. The young man's frank, open ways pleased Molina.

They conversed a few moments more, and then the door swung open to admit the chief of the outlaws.

He carried a cocked revolver in his right hand.

"Evenin' pard's," he saluted, with a mocking bow. "Thort I'd jest drap in an' look ye over. Ye seem ter be gittin' erlong slick as two bugs in er parlor carpet."

They said nothing, but both men gazed steadily at him.

"Hain't neither of ye got a hitch in his torkin' machine, I reckon," continued the man with the revolver. "P'raps this hyer weppin has skeered ye plum' dumb. Ef so, I'll inform ye that I jest took it erlong fer protection. Thort seein's there was two on ye, ye might took er nosbun ter jump me. Ef so ye do now, I kin use cold lead ter cool ye orf. See?"

Eric Craddoc uttered a sneering exclamation.

"It is a brave man who fears his unarmed prisoners!" said the young man, scornfully.

"Oh, that's well ernuff, but then ye know you are two ter one, an' you probably consider yer case jest er leetle desperit. Reckon I'd take big chances ef I stood in ther shoes of either of you galoots."

"What do you want here?"

"Oh, I jest drapped in ter see how ole Molina kem on with ther gal. She's been stuffy as a muel, but I reckon the old man kin persuade her if he tries. How did she tork, ole sinner?"

"She says she will die before she will wed you," replied the mine-owner, hotly.

"Wal, did ye tell her that ef she didn't kem roun' you'd lose yer ears, as I sed?"

"I told her nothing of the kind."

"Oh, ye didn't? Wal, then ther unpleasant duty of tellin' her tall's onter yours truly, Hustler Harry, the celebrated Hard Nut. Sorry ye didn't let me outer the job, but ef I must, w'y I must!"

"Dare to injure that girl, and the wrath of a just God will smite you!" cried the old man.

"Wal, let 'er smite," drawled the chief. "I'm in ther habit of smitin' back, an' I'd just as li'l tackle ole—"

"Hold, man!" shouted Molina. "Dare not to utter such blasphemous words!"

The chief laughed.

"Ole galoot," he said, "I never yet tuck a back seat fer man er devil, and now I hain't reddy ter squawk fer enny other feller. In this little game w'ot I'm a-playin' I hole ther winnin' han'. I'll tell ye now that afore menny hours yer darter shell be my wife."

"I would kill her with my own hand ere I would permit such an outrageous—such an unholy marriage!" hoarsely declared the father.

"Thet's all right; but ye won't hev ther chance, ye know. If she does not agree to marry me, I shall cut off yer ears, an' send 'em ter her, as I tolle ye I w'u'd. Thet'll be apter wake her up. Ef it don't, yer nose shell foller yer ears. Raythur pleasant to contemplate, hey?"

"You fiend!" exclaimed Eric Craddoc, unable to restrain himself longer. "You deserve a place in the hottest corner of hades!"

The chief of the Red Hearts laughed.

"I hain't goin' ter worry, but I'll get all I deserve," he observed, coolly. "Ef I do go down below, the indications are that you will be pushin' clouds long afore that time. Reckon your goose is 'bout ther same as cooked."

"By that I suppose you mean that you intend to murder me?"

"Oh, no! Only jest relieve ye of ther trouble of breathin'."

"I defy you to do your worst, you treacherous devil!"

"You shell find out how bad that is right soon," asserted the chief.

"Bah! I do not fear you. You may as well drop that style of talk. I know that you are no cowboy, despite your claim to be one."

The chief laughed again.

"Your perceptive powers are keen," he sneered. "But you have penetrated the little game when it is too late. It makes no difference whether you die thinking me a cowboy or not. I reckon the character of Hustler Harry may as well withdraw from the boards forever."

"Your villainy will yet be detected and punished as it deserves."

"Well, you will not be there to witness the circus. Try and enjoy yourself while you may. I have decided to again call together the Brothers and have them decide on your case. Your insolent talk has but hastened your own doom. No man ever defied me as you have and lived forty-eight hours to boast of it. Within the hour you shall be called to the council-chamber."

Then the chief backed from the room and closed the door. Along the passage he made his way, brushing against a form that crouched close to the wall. Onward passed the chief, and well it was for him that he did not discover the one who was brushed by his robe as he passed in the darkness. In his hand the crouching man held a knife, and a cry, an exclamation, a word from the white-robed chief would have sealed his own doom.

When the chief had passed, the dark form arose and stole along the passage. In a moment he peered through the square aperture into the cell where Eric Craddoc and Martel Molina were confined. Craddoc and Molina were talking in low tones.

The dark form paused there but a moment, then moved onward to where another ray of light shone out into the passage. Again he peered into a cell, and after a few moments, a soft exclamation of genuine satisfaction escaped him.

Hastily he felt over the door till he found the place where it was bolted. In a moment the bolt shot back, and into the cell glided a cloaked, capped and masked figure, at the same time holding up its hand and saying, in a low tone:

"Hush!"

Dan Shark started up and faced the intruder.

"Helloa!" exclaimed the detective. "What's in the wind, old fel? Has Jack sent for me?"

"Cool and easy, Shark," said the other, in a cautious tone. "You'll wake up the gang if you make a racket."

Shark's eyes glowed brightly, and a hard look came into his face as he saw the knife in the hands of the cloaked man.

"Ah! I catch. You are the executioner, and you have come to cut my throat. Do you expect me to lay down and let you do the job? By heavens, man! I shall fight for my life!"

Involuntarily Shark had lifted his voice. The cloaked man seemed alarmed.

"Hush!" he whispered, hoarsely. "I am no executioner, but am here to release you—to give you life and liberty!"

The detective could not believe his ears.

"Oh, what kind of a game are you working?" he finally uttered, in disgust. "That is too thin!"

"It is the truth," was the swift assertion. "And no time must be lost here in parley. I am going to show you a way out of this cave, and you must bring the men of Cimarron down on these outlaws within the hour. Don't stand there and stare at me, man! I mean just what I say. If you would save your own bacon, capture Jack Tackaloo and wipe out the Brothers of the Red Heart, follow my directions."

Dan Shark was not a slow-witted man, and he began to believe that strange visitor of his was in earnest. He surveyed the cloaked form from head to foot, and saw that a tall man stood before him. Somehow the man's voice sounded familiar.

"If you mean business, say on," said Shark, still keeping his eyes on the gleaming dagger.

"Well, I do mean business. If I am successful, I hope to lead you, without being discovered, to the place where a rope-ladder hangs down into a branch of this cavern. This ladder you must mount, and when you reach the top, you will be at the mouth of the passage that winds upward. You cannot lose your way, for there is but one passage. There are flights of steps, and finally you will find yourself in a round hole. Another rope ladder will carry you out of that into a cave, from which you will be able to make your escape by some steps into a cabin. This cabin stands on the mountain-side overlooking Cimarron. In a short time you can be in the camp."

Gradually Shark began to believe that the cloaked man was not attempting to deceive him, but he could not refrain from asking:

"Meanwhile, what will you be doing?"

"I shall remain here."

"Why do you not bring the men of Cimarron into this place by the route just described?"

"I did think of it, but resolved to remain and keep my eye on this Red Heart chief if I could find any one else whom I could send out. When I looked in here and saw that the irons had been removed from your hands and feet, I was delighted. I saw in an instant that you were my man."

"You are not one of the Brotherhood?"

"It makes no difference now. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes. Lead the way."

"Here, take these, and if we are forced to strike for our lives, use them for all they are worth."

The cloaked man thrust a knife and revolver into Old Shark's hands, and at that instant the last shadow of suspicion faded from the detective's mind.

They left the cell, closing the door behind them. Along the passage they stole, past the other cells to the council-chamber.

Fortune favored them. No one was there.

Across the chamber glided the cloaked figure, with Dan Shark at its heels. Within a minute they were both standing at the foot of the rope ladder.

"Here, Shark," whispered the strange rescuer. "Here are matches and a piece of a candle. You will need them. Bring the best men of Cimarron. The outlaws are all in the cave. For God's sake lose no time! It is past midnight now, and you must be back here soon."

"I will do my level best," said the detective, also in a whisper. "I hope to know before morning who my deliverer is. Man, you have saved me from death and I will not forget it in a minute. I know that you are white, despite that cloak you wear with a crimson heart on your breast. Let me grip your hand before I start."

Their hands met in the darkness in a strong, hearty grip.

Then Dan Shark went upward upon the swaying ladder into the dense blackness above.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MASK TORN AWAY.

Up through the darkness went Old Shark, till he reached the top of the ladder. Climbing up into the passage, he moved forward several rods before he ventured to light the candle. When he had done this, he hurried forward, muttering:

"Now for it. I must not wind myself by hurrying too much, but I must exert every nerve. There are prisoners in the hands of those human vultures who may suffer if they are not soon rescued."

Along the passage he hurried, finding the ascent very difficult at times. His lips were firm set, and he breathed heavily but regularly. He appeared like a man who had accurately judged his own powers and knew just what he could do. Not for a moment did he pause until the second rope-ladder was reached. There he was obliged to extinguish the candle and put it in his pocket before he went further.

A few moments later, the detective relighted the candle in the small cavern above. He easily found the steps and was soon standing in front of the cabin on the mountain-side.

The moon was up and its light showed him the town of Cimarron far below. Only for an instant did he pause to inspect his surroundings. His eyes fell upon the path which led downward, and without a word, he sprung forward.

Down the steep and difficult descent bounded Olk Shark at a pace which threatened broken limbs or a more serious disaster. It seemed a miracle that he kept on his feet. Down, down he leaped, not knowing where his feet would strike half of the time when he made a spring. He reached the level in safety, but did not pause an instant. On, toward the camp he ran.

Already he had decided not to include the marshal in the number of men whom he would choose to accompany him. During the time that he had been in Cimarron he had spotted a few whom he was satisfied were honest men. He would secure them and they would know whom to select for companions.

Into the camp he dashed and was soon rapping

on the door of a cabin. The owner quickly appeared, revolver in hand.

"W'ot's ther row?" he demanded.

With a few words, Old Shark made everything clear to the fellow. As soon as he understood, the man was intensely interested.

"By Moses!" he cried. "If you kin lead us thar, you're ther galoot we're hankerin' arter. If ye're foolin' 'bout hit—"

"Don't waste time!" exclaimed Shark. "I mean business, and I want twenty or thirty good men."

"Hole on a jiff," spluttered the man. "I'll be with ye, an' I kin pick ther very galoots ye want, ur my name hain't Tip Jimson."

He spoke the truth. In a remarkably brief space of time thirty armed men were ready to accompany the detective.

"Plum' grit clean through—ther hull o' em," assured Tip Jimson. "They'll fight like tigers. Ye says ye kin lead us thar in ten minutes. We're ready. Show ahead, pard."

Straight toward the cabin at the foot of the cliff Dan Shark led the men. When this was reached, he gave the peculiar rap of the Red Heart Brotherhood. Twice or three times he was forced to knock, ere he received an answer.

Finally a distrustful voice demanded:

"Who is there?"

Shark rapped twelve times.

There was a moment's pause, then the woman said in a doubtful way:

"Thort you was all—"

She never finished the sentence. She had opened the door a trifle when both Shark and Jimson hurled themselves against it. The old woman was thrown down, and in a moment Dan Shark seized her. She struggled to her feet felt for a rope which hung against the wall. She evidently knew just where it hung, but in her excitement she missed it.

The rope connected with an alarm-bell within the cavern.

Shark kicked the old woman's feet from under her, and half a score of hands held her while she was bound and gagged. When this was accomplished, the detective arose, and said:

"Now every man be ready with his weapons. We are going into the den."

Within the council-chamber the Brothers of the Red Heart were again assembled. There had been some delay about getting them together, as several of them had been drinking deeply. Indeed the entire band, with the exception of the chief, had drank some, and two were so intoxicated that they were unable to be present at the "trial" of Eric Craddoc.

Strangely enough, although at first he had forbidden their drinking, the chief said nothing when they continued to do so.

When they assembled within the council-chamber, the men were surprised to see several glasses and a large pitcher containing a blood-red liquid standing upon the altar-like structure beside the chief.

"Brothers," said the white-robed man, "again we are assembled to decide the fate of a human being. Numbers Four and Five will bring the young prisoner in Cell 2 to this chamber."

The two men thus instructed departed from the chamber. They soon returned with Eric Craddoc between them. The young man was led to the stool directly in front of the chief.

"My brothers," continued the chief, "this is the offender. He has dared to threaten our organization—he has dared to heap vile epithets upon your chief—he has offended in various ways. I feel that he deserves a similar doom to that of the detective whose fate you pronounced a short time ago, but I am ready to leave everything with you."

The chief paused a moment, and then said to Eric:

"If you have anything to say in your own defense, speak."

The young man sprung up.

"I protest against this outrage!" he cried.

"You have no right to—"

"Stop!" thundered the white-robed man. "You are not to question our right. Might is right. You are to speak in your own defense, if you have anything to say."

For a moment Eric was silent, then he said, more calmly:

"I suppose it is useless to make a protest against your right to try and condemn me, but at least I may beg of you that I am given a fair show for my life."

The chief laughed scornfully.

"You presume to doubt our fairness," he said. "This but makes your chances of escaping death still smaller. In fact there is but one of two things in store for you, and those two things are imprisonment and death."

"I see that you are not disposed to give me any chance at all. You might as well have condemned and butchered me without permitting me to speak. Murder is your evident intent, and I have little hope of mercy at the hands of such a conscienceless crew of cut-throats."

"You hear his words, my brothers," said the chief, as he waved his hand toward the grim circle. "He continues to heap insults on the heads of us all."

An ominous murmur came from the cloaked figures.

"It is time wasted to allow him further speech. You may as well pronounce his doom at once. Let me hear what it shall be."

"Death!"

Again that terrible word echoed through the council-chamber.

"Good!" exclaimed the chief, evidently well pleased. "Your decision suits me well. See! I fill these glasses with wine—blood-red, like the liquid which flows in the veins of the condemned. I pass the glasses to you all. We will drink to the success of all our schemes and the speedy death of our foes."

He filled and passed around the glasses, then he stood in front of the prisoner with his own glass lifted.

"Drink, brothers, drink all together!"

With the exception of the chief, every man drained his glass. The wearer of the white robe had lifted his when, with a furious cry, Eric Craddoc leaped forward and tore the spotless mask away.

The face of Hustler Harry, the cowboy, was revealed.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SHOWN IN THEIR TRUE LIGHTS.

At the same instant, a band of men poured out of one of the passages into the chamber, giving utterance to a chorus of wild yells.

In an instant a revolver leaped into the hands of Hustler Harry, and, with incredible swiftness he shot out the lights, plunging the chamber into darkness.

Then above the other sounds a commanding voice was heard to shout:

"Surrender, Brothers of the Red Heart! You are surrounded on every side, and escape is impossible! Resistance means death!"

The desperado Brotherhood seemed paralyzed with fear and amazement. From out of a passage a bright light was turned upon them, and the men of Cimarron swarmed in and took them prisoners after a feeble resistance. Not a man was slain.

Ere morning the entire town of Cimarron was aware that the Brothers of the Red Heart had been captured and their prisoners released.

At sunrise a great crowd gathered in front of the cabin against the cliff. Immediately before the cabin door a platform had been hastily constructed, and it was reported that revelations of a startling nature were to be made to the assembly.

After a time the throng grew clamorous, and finally the door swung open. A medium-sized, smooth-faced man stepped out upon the platform.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the stranger, with a bow, "I am Dan Shark, the detective. I came to these parts in search of a man known in Missouri as Jack Tackaloo, who is badly wanted there for murder. You have known me perhaps—a few of you, at least—as Uncle Peter Hodge, from Maine, in search of my first wife's brother, Jonathan Jinkins."

"What I have to say to you I shall make as brief as possible. You all know of the startling events which have happened within the past few days—the kidnapping of Miss Molina and her father, who proclaimed a certain supposed cowboy to be an outlaw. You know that a defiant bulletin, purporting to be from this cowboy, in which he claimed to be chief of the Brothers of the Red Heart was posted in the camp. None of you knew that for the last two days I was a prisoner in the Red Hearts' power, and to-night I was condemned to death. A friend released me, showed me a secret way out of this den, and I brought the best men in Cimarron down upon the Red Hearts. They were captured, and in their chief I found the murderer I sought—Jack Tackaloo."

"In order that you may fully understand this strange case, I must explain that Tackaloo, who is a handsome man physically, has a half-brother who is his very counterpart except in features. Tackaloo's true name is Calvin Barret. He is the older brother, and from his early boyhood his mind was filled with evil things, and his acts were such as caused his father untold misery. His mother died at his birth, and his father married again. By his second wife he had another son, Philip. Strangely enough, both of these children had birthmarks on their left wrists, and, still more strangely, these marks were exactly similar—a crimson heart!

"When Philip Barret was fourteen his brother Calvin, ran away and went to sea. The vessel on which he sailed went down in unknown waters and it was supposed that the entire crew perished. Calvin returned home no more.

"But the reckless son was not dead. He was the only one who escaped from the wreck, and he changed his name. He became a gambler and villain who would hesitate at nothing to obtain money. He committed many misdeeds and fled from place to place, changing his name a score of times. Within the past year his moves have been rapid. A little more than a year ago he organized a band of outlaws and called them the Brothers of the Red Heart. They began operations in Southern Montana.

"At this time Philip Barret was also in

Montana, but he little dreamed that his brother lived and was near. Philip was attacked by a fever and received care at the house of a hermit-like man, named Andrew Foscolo. Foscolo had made some rich gold discoveries and was said to be wealthy. He lived alone with his daughter and an old negro servant. The daughter did much to nurse the sick man back to life. When Philip finally recovered, he left Andrew Foscolo's promising to return within a month, for the fair Ruth had completely stolen away his heart.

"The following day after Philip's departure, the Brothers of the Red Heart, with Calvin Barret at their head, appeared and attempted to force the old man to reveal the spot where his gold was concealed. This he refused to do, and he was finally murdered by the chief of the infamous band. As Calvin Barret struck down old Andrew Foscolo, Ruth, the old man's daughter, saw the red heart on the murderer's wrist. This convinced her that he was Philip Barret, and over her father's dead body she swore to hunt the murderer down.

"When Philip Barret returned he found only a mass of ruins where Andrew Foscolo's home had been. He also found a new-made grave. After a time he learned what had happened, and he, too, swore to hunt down the desperado Brotherhood.

A short time later the Brothers of the Red Heart had a conflict with a band of vigilantes and the organization was broken up for the time. Calvin Barret went East. In Missouri he was known as Jack Tackaloo. There he committed a murder and I took his trail. He led me a pretty chase, turning his face westward. Meeting some of his old band, he recognized the Brotherhood and came to Cimarron. Here he found a small band of petty robbers, and the two forces united under the name of the Brothers of the Red Heart, and their secret retreat was this den which had formerly served the petty robbers.

"After a time I trailed Jack Tackaloo to this place. I met Hustler Harry, the cowboy, and attempted to take him prisoner. I found more than my match. Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to present the man who was too much for Old Dan Shark!"

The Hustler Harry stepped out through the doorway, doffing his wide-brimmed hat and bowing gracefully.

A murmur ran over the crowd. Gradually it grew louder and louder, but Shark quelled it with a gesture.

"This ladies and gentlemen," said the detective, "is Philip Barret, a white man from the ground up. He it was who found the secret entrance to the Red Hearts' den; he it was who released me and sent me for the men of Cimarron. He staid that he might protect the prisoners from harm. Already had he knocked one of the band senseless, bound, gagged and hidden him. He did this that he might secure the cloak and mask which the man wore. Disguised thus, after he had released me, he succeeded in tapping the chief of the Brotherhood on the head. Ere the chief recovered, he bound and gagged him. Then he carried him to the cell where I have been confined. Not till that moment did Philip Barret know that his older brother lived, for he had not met him while in this camp. You can imagine his amazement when he saw his face beneath the white mask. He exchanged the dark robe he wore for the white robe of the chief, whom he afterward successfully impersonated."

Again a murmur ran over the crowd, and again the detective checked the outburst.

"That is not all he did," continued Shark. "He allowed the men to drink, and as several of them filled up quite well, the absence of the man whom he had tapped on the cranium was not observed. In his pocket he had a stupefying drug. He thought if he could only get some of that into the gang, they would be robbed of their strength and would be easily taken by the men from camp. He managed to accomplish what he desired by placing the drug in some wine, and causing the men to drink to the death of young Eric Craddoc, whom they had just condemned. He drank none himself. Just as the men drained their glasses, Cradec, who was deceived with the rest, tore away the mask which hid the face of the supposed chief. Then the men from camp charged into the chamber. Realizing in what danger he stood, our friend shot out the lights. The drug got in its work and the Brothers of the Red Heart were easily taken, thanks to him whom you have known as Hustler Harry."

The crowd could restrain its enthusiasm no longer. One big fellow bellowed:

"Hooraw fer Hustler Harry, ther White Man frum High Notch!"

Such a yell as burst from that throng! Men, women and children joined in the universal roar, and for five minutes they seemed trying to yell themselves hoarse.

When the excitement had subsided, Philip Barret said, with deep earnestness:

"My friends, I thank you. I am glad the misunderstanding that has existed between us is at an end. But, more than for anything else, I am glad that the great misunderstanding be-

tween the one I love and myself is forever ended. She is here, and no longer believes me her father's murderer."

Ruth Foscolo was at his side. She held cut her hand and he took it, a great light of joy shining in his fine eyes. Her own face was wondrously beautiful, with a look of great happiness.

"The clouds are riven asunder," she said, slowly; "and the sunlight shines through. I am an avenger no longer!"

Once more the crowd cheered, and together Philip Barret and Ruth Foscolo went back into the cabin.

"Now," spoke up the detective, once more, "I will call forth those who have been prisoners in the power of these villains."

Martel Molina, Pearl and Eric appeared.

The crowd was at fever heat, and again they cheered. Molina made a brief speech, and in three minutes gained more friends than he ever had before in the camp.

Following this, Shark called for the Brothers of the Red Heart. Still attired in robes and mask, with their hands bound behind them and a man with a cocked revolver at the back of every one, twelve of the band appeared. The chief was not with them. Hisses and groans from the crowd greeted their appearance. They were formed in line facing the assembled people.

"Ladies and gentlemen," smiled the detective, "these are the identical birds in full-dress uniform. They are a gay-looking set, you must acknowledge. When you see their faces, you can form an opinion of the society with which you have been mingling."

He clapped his hands, and, at the signal, the men behind the desperadoes removed the masks.

A shout of surprise went up from the crowd, for nearly every man was known in the camp!

"Those are the chickadees who have been kicking up such a dust around this camp for the last few days," declared Shark.

"The chief! the chief! Bring out the chief!" came from the throng.

"In a moment," said the detective, coolly.

He waved his hand, and the Brothers of the Red Heart were marched back into the cabin.

"Friends," said the detective, "when the men from Cimarron reached the cell where Philip Barret placed the chief, it was found that he was free. He fought like a demon, and, in the encounter, he was mortally wounded. He will be brought out."

Four men appeared bearing a stretcher.

Upon it lay the chief of the Red Hearts, looking white and ghastly.

It was Horace Kelnot!

A wild cry of incredulity and amazement came from the spectators. When silence was restored, Old Shark said:

"This is the crafty scoundrel who deceived you all. This is Calvin Barret, alias Jack Tackaloo, alias Horace Kelnot. He played his part skillfully. When trailed by the Girl Avenger, he sought to throw everything upon the shoulders of Hustler Harry, whom he recognized as his brother Philip. He killed the negro, Black Joe, who was with the girl. He secured a suit similar to the cowboy's, and, with a mask over his face, deceived every one who saw him. Those wristlets which he always wore concealed the red heart on his wrist. He intended to capture Philip and have him hanged. Molina was to be killed, Pearl was to become Calvin's wife, and he would leave these parts. Through Pearl he would obtain possession of the Red Star Mine. It could easily have been disposed of. But all his schemes have failed, and within a few hours he will have to answer for his crimes to the Great Judge above."

The wounded scoundrel turned his face toward the spectators.

"I've got it for good," he said, in a faint tone. "It is just what I deserve, I reckon; but it does seem that I cannot die. If I have got to go, I'm going game."

But he did not. His last hours were full of such terrible torture as comes to many wicked men when dying. By turns he cursed, prayed, shrieked and wept. Those who watched beside him were filled with horror. But the end came at last.

The Brothers of the Red Heart met justice at the hands of a band of lynchers. Every one seemed to think that it was a fitting end for their lawless lives.

Posey Pete disappeared from Cimarron City, and neither he nor his companions, Hickory Bill and Casper, the Spaniard, were ever again seen within its borders. The men of the town learned the parts which the three ruffians had played, and, had they appeared, they would have stood a good show of being lynched.

When Kelnot and Molina were in the hills together, the two-faced villain had stolen forward and paid the three kidnappers well to talk as they did, promising to protect them from the men of Cimarron, should they get into trouble by doing so. Kelnot was the masked man previously seen with the three, at which time he hired them if they recaptured the girl to deliver

her into his hands. The mock rescue was planned at that time. Casper's wound was an imaginary one.

Everything was made clear between Philip Barret and Ruth Foscolo. When Ruth asked him why he had denied his identity when they met in the Silver Palace, he replied that, had he confessed, his little game would have been ruined.

"And to think, dear Philip," she murmured with a shudder, "that I was determined to slay you! Had I succeeded—"

"Hush, darling!" he beseeched, as he gazed lovingly into her dark eyes. "Do not think of that. All is well that ends well."

There was a double wedding. Martel Molina overcame his aversion for Eric Craddoc sufficiently to consent to a marriage between the young man and Pearl. Eric proved to be of a good family and really the possessor of moderate wealth.

Old Shark, the Shadow, on duty hundreds of miles away, knowing when the ceremony was to take place, sent congratulations.

THE END.

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